19세 미만 구독 불가
V'IOLET
쿠유 장편소설
터닝
Turning
501-750

Turning ( ) by Kuyu ( ). Volume 3 (Chapter 501-750)

Yuder was a commoner Omega who rose to the top with his ability.

When he woke up again after being falsely accused and executed, he was back 11 years ago before everything began.

A chance to get back…

He must not repeat the same mistake he did before.

To survive, and to save the world, now he had to save the man he had killed!

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Chapter 501

In an instant, the atmosphere around Yuder turned icy cold. Even those who had been laughing and pretending not to pay attention to him suddenly became cautious and hesitant to speak. The man who had addressed Yuder also struggled to reply, his face a blend of disbelief and fury. However, he eventually managed to collect his emotions and spoke again.

“Ahem… I see. Well, given your commoner background, it’s understandable. I am Baron Durmand. I’ve heard much about your recent achievements in the West.”

“Is that so?”

“…”

This time, an even greater number of people remained silent for longer. Baron Durmand twisted his face into something resembling a rat and asked, “Really, now. Don’t they teach you about manners and eloquence in your Cavalry? I approached you to offer congratulations, but you seem quite guarded.”

Due to the palpable tension, even the dancing Cavalry members started to direct their gaze in this direction. Most wore expressions of surprise and concern.

Yuder sent a subtle, reassuring look to a few of the members who seemed on the verge of rushing over to him.

‘It’s fine. Just stay where you are.’

The members were probably shocked, thinking that as soon as Kishiar left, Yuder would be surrounded and attacked by nobles. However, this was a situation Yuder had already anticipated.

For the perfect execution of the dance scheduled for today and the events surrounding it, Kishiar had not even disclosed to the Emperor and Empress who he would be dancing with or what kind of dance it would be. They could guess that the Emperor, learning of this late, would call for his sibling, and that actions would be initiated by Duke Diarca as soon as Kishiar left.

If he had to be on guard anyway, Yuder figured it was better to control the situation himself. When you create a predictable opening for the enemy to attack, there's no need to be on guard all the time.

And now was precisely that moment.

Jimmy, who seemed ready to rush over after having been guzzling food, Ever, who had even stopped dancing to scan the surroundings with a sharp gaze, and Kanna, who had been scrutinizing the faces of the nobles one by one, all stepped back quietly upon meeting his gaze. But Gakane still approached as close as a few steps away, crossing his arms. Though he was smiling as if nothing was amiss, his posture clearly conveyed the message that he was ready to intervene at any moment.

'So much for saying it's okay.'

Still, the dark mood Yuder had often sensed on Gakane's face during previous encounters was mostly absent, so he let it pass. Perhaps because Gakane had moved closer, the atmosphere seemed to relax somewhat.

'Is it because of his face?'

Ignoring the murmurs around him, Yuder calmly opened his mouth.

"It never occurred to me that you approached to offer congratulations, especially since you began by cryptically introducing yourself and stating you've heard much about me. In the manners

I've been taught, one typically states their purpose first, offers congratulations, and then exchanges introductions. Mentioning someone's prior status after they've been officially titled is considered a serious breach of etiquette. Has something changed that I'm not aware of?"

"…"

Baron Durmand's face flushed crimson. It was as if he hadn't expected a commoner-turned-hero to not only stand his ground but also counter him in such a manner.

The crowd always brimmed with people who would needle him like this whenever Yuder received a new title or a significant reward. He had long grown accustomed to the vexing task of discerning the intentions of such people.

Being taciturn on occasions like this was not a flaw. There was no need to grovel and shudder at every sarcastic comment. Although power and influence among nobles weren't solely determined by one's official title, Yuder did share the same rank as the man before him. Officially, he couldn't be considered any lesser.

'There's technically no need for formal language… but fine, I can tolerate that much. Getting caught up in etiquette based on age differences is too tedious.'

"Your point seems valid. I must have momentarily forgotten in my excitement. Haha. But I trust you're not overly offended by such trivial matters?"

"No, I wasn't particularly offended."

"Good. Then let's just consider this a small misunderstanding."

Baron Durmand forced a smile, his eyes tinged with barely suppressed fury, and moved on. The surrounding nobles also turned

their gaze away, resuming their conversations as if nothing had happened. Yuder wondered what sort of expression they'd make if he praised them for maintaining etiquette while refusing to admit any fault and attributing it all to 'misunderstanding', but he decided to let it go.

'Baron Durmand. He was known to be close to the current Duke of Diarca. After the Duke died, he held his position for a while but fell out of favor with the heir and retreated to a rural domain.'

A man of little personal achievement, relying only on the power of the faction he was part of; a typical leech. While he might have been somewhat respected among the nobles, he wasn't indispensable to the Diarca Duke's family.

The man was just the right kind to be sent in lieu of the Duke himself for bothersome and noisy affairs like this one.

And that, in turn, offered Yuder an inkling of how Duke Diarca felt about him and the Cavalry. Not a threat significant enough to draw close scrutiny, but not entirely dismissable either. If this was the 'gift' prepared by Duke Diarca, then the remaining gestures would be equally mediocre.

'I had thought that something much stronger would come out, especially considering Kiolle's whining…'

As expected, it was all for naught.

A brief, icy smile flickered across Yuder's lips and vanished. His gaze then shifted to Duke Diarca, who was drinking wine, appearing wholly unconcerned by the ongoing events.

'If this trend continues, then next would be…'

"But I do genuinely wish to celebrate the hero of the West. Might we meet again personally after today?"

Yuder stared quietly into Baron Durmand's eyes, which sparkled oddly as if he were earnestly inviting him, then shook his head without changing his expression.

"Though I've received a title, I'm committed to the Cavalry. It's difficult for me to make personal engagements."

"What if I told you that my birthday is soon, and I'm planning a grand celebration?"

"No."

"Well, in that case, will you at least accept this? It's something prepared for today."

At Baron Durmand's gesture, someone brought forth a long object wrapped neatly in red paper. It was impossible to tell what was inside.

"Even if you can't attend, you'll accept this, right? It's a token of my sincerity for today."

For a moment, the gaze of those around Yuder intensified. Some watched with anger, while others observed with a voyeuristic curiosity.

"It will be difficult."

"Good heavens! At this point, even I am genuinely offended. Are you saying you can't accept even this small gesture? Do you mean to ignore me?"

Baron Durmand dramatically shifted his shoulders, aiming to draw the attention of the crowd.

"I don't know why you would think that."

“Enough with playing dumb. I’ve also heard about dangerous items being found within the palace before this party. Several palace workers preparing for the event have gone missing. Everyone knows the Cavalry decided to be extra cautious due to these suspicious activities.”

Baron Durmand’s voice bristled with anger.

“Are you saying you’re avoiding even a normal gift because you’re suspicious? If you don’t suspect me, then how can you refuse like this!”

Yes, he knew it would come to this.

Yuder was about to speak when someone else stepped forward before him.

“I apologize for the intrusion. I know it’s not polite to interrupt a conversation, but I’ve heard that actions like this are not permitted in today’s party without prior permission. Have you received such permission?”

The person who stepped forward before Yuder could speak was none other than Gakane Bolunwald.

Though his smile seemed impeccably courteous, his sharp eyes were not hidden, causing murmurs to stir among the surrounding nobles once again.

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Chapter 502

“Permission?”

“Yes. I heard that even our Cavalry needed prior permission if we wanted to bring surprise gifts for the comrades who would join us here. The warning also came with the instruction not to casually exchange food, drinks, or other items with strangers, for both etiquette and safety reasons. So, we arrived here carrying nothing.”

“Gakane.”

Ignoring Yuder’s gaze, which seemed to suggest he should withdraw his words immediately, Gakane continued in a very clear tone.

“The information we received in advance ends there. We are not aware of any unfortunate incidents occurring in the palace during the party preparation period. I suspect Yuderno, Baron Aile would have wanted to convey the same message. Perhaps it is a misunderstanding to call this an insult?”

Gakane pronounced the word ‘misunderstanding’ with particular emphasis. The expression on Baron Durmand changed. Instead of discussing the unfavorable facts, he quickly changed the subject.

“Is two people cornering one person an action worthy of those who are authorized to act in the name of His Majesty the Emperor? Baron Aile! Speak if you have something to say.”

“I am the one who spoke, not Baron Aile. I stepped forward solely to clarify the facts. Would it not be hard to see a connection between Baron Aile and me?”

“What is your name?”

“I am Gakane Bolunwald.”

“Bolunwald? That’s an uncommon surname. Are you from the distinguished family of General Jureli Bolunwald from the South?”

“Yes.”

“Not from the current generation, I presume.”

“He is my great-great-great-great-grandfather.”

“I see.”

Yuder, who only remembered that Gakane’s family was once illustrious but had since fallen into decline, heard this information for the first time. The expressions of Baron Durmand and those around him changed slightly upon learning that Gakane was not of common birth. Their eyes seemed partly impressed, yet increasingly malicious.

“So, a once-prestigious family from the South. I remember hearing the unfortunate rumors that all you have left is your name, and you’re even knocking on the doors of wealthy patrons to sell your title.”

Gakane’s face turned pale for a moment.

“To think I’d see you here, and youre even standing up for an ennobled comrade! Quite the story within stories. Truly a delightful spectacle.”

Though he phrased it as if it were a pity, his true intent was clear. He was mocking Gakane’s family for its fallen glory and simultaneously scorning him for standing up for a friend of common birth.

The reaction was immediate.

“Your words are going too far!”

“Why bring up irrelevant matters? Apologize.”

“Gakane! Yuder! Just come this way!”

The Cavalry members who had rushed in surrounded Yuder and Gakane en masse. Yuder didn’t even get a chance to respond. With everyone voicing their anger, the hall was filled with such commotion that it was impossible to understand who was saying what.

Even the music and dancing stopped. As the situation grew increasingly tense, an unmistakable look of delight appeared on Baron Durmand’s face.

“Am I overstepping by saying I’m relieved the rumor has been exaggerated? Gifts are too dangerous to accept, the celebratory intent is unrecognized, and now even a simple expression of concern demands an apology! Ha-ha.”

“In my opinion, there was no need to say such a thing in this place. Please apologize to Sir Volunbalt.”

The one who spoke this time was Pruelle. When the First Prince of the Tain family stepped forward, Baron Durmand glanced sideways, as if calculating something. Seeing that Duke Diarca remained calmly seated, he grew even bolder.

“Oh, the First Prince of the Tain family. You weren’t present at Duke Tain’s trial, so I can only imagine how surprised you must be to see me here. You looked sick, but you seem healthy now.”

“…”

“Well, if everyone desires an apology, what more can I, Durmand, say? I came here with a joyful heart to serve the Empire in my old

age, and this is what I encounter. It’s truly heartbreaking, but what can be done?”

Durmand retorted sarcastically and then raised his voice toward everyone present.

“Let me say this: the Empire’s most revered poet, Duke Mechis Da Diarca, once wrote, ‘Just as the color of a trodden shadow never changes, clear water can never become the sea.’”

“…”

“A poem that is quite fitting for today’s circumstances, don’t you think?”

“What does that even mean?”

“What’s he talking about, shadows and the sea?”

Yuder heard the whispers of the Cavalry members not far from him. He instinctively sensed that the words were not favorable, but the unfamiliar poetic language made it hard for him to grasp the underlying meaning immediately.

Meanwhile, the faces of the people around Baron Durmand were all smiling, as if they understood perfectly. And Yuder knew that poem too. It was one of the lines that Emperor Katchian had often mentioned to him during his reign.

‘Yes… The essence is that one’s innate qualities cannot be changed, no matter what one does.’

No matter what you do, the color of the shadow underfoot never changes. Fish from freshwater can never live in the sea. Even if circumstances seem to change, in the end, nothing really doesan icy and clear-eyed recognition of reality.

‘Now I understand where he heard that.’

Yuder clenched his fist and looked back at Gakane, who was standing nearby. His face was still a bit pale. The look in his eyes was one of embarrassment, clearly unprepared for the individuals who had stood up to defend his honor.

Gakane probably hadn’t anticipated that events would unfold in this manner. He likely had no idea that Baron Durmand knew so much about his family and circumstances, that he would humiliate him so publicly, and that the other members would react in this way.

Gakane looked as if he was about to say something but then closed his mouth. Seeing this, Yuder let out a small sigh.

‘If it had been earlier, I would have asked why he did something so pointless.’

But now he understood why Gakane had stepped forward. It was his own way of worrying and expressing himself. And the other members felt the same; none of them would have stood idly by if one of their comrades was being insulted. Yuder knew this because he would have done the same.

Yuder thought of Gakane, who had never made a fuss about his origins or revealed any personal difficulties during his long tenure in the Cavalry. Despite knowing that there was no need to go to such lengths, he understood a bit of why Gakane had stepped forward.

He let out a deep sigh.

‘…The one thing that’s certain is…’

There was no need to indulge this nonsense any further. Thanks to the passionate camaraderie of his fellow members, the situation had taken a slightly different direction than expected. While this

deviated from the original plan, he didn't particularly mind. So, what could be done?

"Very well. I will accept that gift."

"…What? Yuder!"

"If Baron Durmand doubts the intentions of the Cavalry and myself, and believes this to be harassment, then the reason must be simply because I haven't accepted the gift. Accepting it should provide the proof you require."

Yuder approached Baron Durmand and snatched the gift wrapped in red paper.

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Chapter 503

Originally, his plan was to sufficiently provoke Baron Durmand and then leverage the inter-relationships among nobles he knew to draw out Duke Diarca himself to the scene. Even if everyone knew that Diarca was behind Durmand, it made a big difference whether that was explicitly revealed or not. If he could just compel Duke Diarca to personally deal with someone of lowborn origin, he could bet that those who didn't particularly like House Diarca would be quietly pleased.

Whether it's this side or that, everyone wants to muddy the waters of the Cavalry's success. But that alone won't make them committed enough to sail in the same boat forever.

From Durmand's ramblings, it was clear that the elaborate ruse they had set up before the party was aimed at causing undue tension in the Cavalry and ruining public opinion.

People wield the most power in attacking what they themselves dread and avoid. In this Empire, what the nobles fear most is the loss of their honor. Long periods of stagnant peace have made fights over rotten honor even more potent than armed conflicts.

A low voice resonated in Yuder's mind, it was a recollection of something Kishiar had said in his previous life when forcefully sitting him down to lecture him on the duties and virtues a Cavalry Commander should possess.

"If you truly want to scare them, drag them down to our level. Even a single mingling word can seriously tarnish their honor. This method is faster and more effective than a punch, especially when we are seen as inferior and have nothing to lose."

Back then, he hadn’t fully grasped that words could be stronger than fists. But as he grew older and experienced more, he realized that it was not untrue.

Although the current situation didn’t seem too favorable for the Cavalry, those who had stepped up from this side were mostly members who were either of lowborn origin or had never really fit in among the nobles.

The point was, if they were dragged down to the same level, the other side had much more to lose than the Cavalry did.

Yuder untied the gift package he had been holding in front of Baron Durmand. A long, crimson-tinted glass bottle revealed itself.

“Alcohol.”

He had suspected as much from the weight and the sloshing liquid inside. The name stuck on the surface was also not unfamiliar to him.

“Quelochet.”

Upon reading the name, a few individuals started whispering with surprised faces.

The world was full of unique drinks for the culinary adventurers out there. Quelochet was one of them. Although its color resembled ordinary wine, it was actually brewed from various dangerous toxic materials that had been processed. While the most dangerous elements were removed and it was diluted enough to be drinkable, it still remained hazardous. Occasionally, people even died from consuming it.

Still, just like there were people who enjoyed pufferfish dishes or venomous birds or scorpion cuisine, there were also quite a few who

enjoyed this risky beverage. Many believed that if drunk carefully, it could even contribute to a long, healthy life, and it sold well as a gift.

Among the ingredients that went into Quelochet was a fluid extracted from monsters. In his previous life, Yuder had received a poisonous liquor as a gift that was based on this drink but had additional monster blood mixed in.

I had expected something like this… but really, how clich.

“Lord Elle, do you know what this drink is?”

“…It’s a famous liquor made by mixing poisonous ingredients. It’s also known for containing the bodily fluids of poisonous monsters.”

Ever asked Pruelle, whose expression had soured. The members, surprised by his answer, began to murmur amongst themselves.

“It has what from a monster?”

“So, is this poison alcohol?”

“Strictly speaking, it’s not poison alcohol… but it’s hard to see it as a graceful gift either.”

Despite the prickly words, Baron Durmand showed no change in expression. He looked down at Yuder, who was quietly observing the liquor, and spoke with an oddly friendly yet arrogant tone.

“I thought there could be no more fitting gift for one who risks their lives to slay monsters. Of course, dangerous ingredients were used, but I’ve drunk it without a problem.”

“…”

“As you may or may not know, the traditional way to reciprocate for celebratory liquor at a party is to drink it right away.”

“Are you saying I should drink this right now?”

Someone protested sharply, and Baron Durmand chuckled.

“I didn’t say that. If you’re scared, then there’s nothing to be done. But was it not Baron Aile who agreed to accept the gift?”

‘As amusing as it is… he did use his brain.’

If Yuder were to reject the gift out of fear of poison, he’d effectively be insulting the giver. If he chose to drink it and something happened, he only had himself to blame. If a commoner like him suffered any harm from drinking the poison, few would take his side. Either way, it was a win-win situation for Durmand.

In such a situation where nobody knew what else was in the drink, they all would have avoided it.

However, Yuder was not in such a situation. He smiled faintly.

“Very well. I like it. Let’s drink it now.”

“Yuder!”

The members called out to him, their faces filled with anger and worry. Their unfamiliar yet familiar expressions seemed to not know what to do.

Amid the palpable tension, Yuder picked up one of the glasses on the table and effortlessly uncorked the bottle. He looked around and then called someone close to him.

“Kanna, would you mind pouring for me?”

“Me?”

“Yes, you.”

Startled, Kanna seemed to realize something. Until today, she had always avoided Yuder with an odd expression, but now she seemed to have no intention of doing so. She hurried over and took the bottle.

As the purplish liquid flowed into the glass, a fine sweat appeared on Kanna's forehead. Close to her hand, an ethereal energy flickered, indicating she was using her abilities. To assist her, Yuder subtly summoned a breeze.

Now, even the subtlest sound from Kanna's lips could be heard loud and clear by him.

"Before coming here, someone tampered with this. It feels like something was added. Probably… a drug that induces stomach pain."

"…"

"Yuder, would it be okay if I pour just this much?"

Kanna emphasized the word 'okay' loud enough for everyone to hear, a worried look in her eyes. Yuder nodded his head, responding decisively.

"It's okay. That's enough."

"…Are you sure it's alright?"

"I might get a little drunk, but it should be fine."

"Alright, understood."

Kanna, who had seemed reluctant to hand over the glass, finally let go. Yuder took the glass and without hesitation, drained it completely. The Cavalry members clenched their teeth and murmured quietly amongst themselves.

Then, moments later, he set the glass down with a nonchalant expression.

“The alcohol seems fine, but it’s not to my taste. Still, since you’ve offered it, I’ll gladly accept.”

“…Really? Are you alright?”

“Yes.”

The expression of Baron Durmand subtly changed. Yuder raised his hand and called over a servant. After ordering a glass of water as a chaser, he asked for another empty glass, causing Baron Durmand’s gaze to grow increasingly suspicious.

“Since you’ve offered such fine alcohol, it’s only polite that I return the favor. I’d like for you to have a taste as well.”

As Yuder poured alcohol into the new glass, Baron Durmand seemed to realize the shift in the situation and took a step back.

“No, I…”

“Why so?”

“My stomach isn’t feeling well today. The drink was brought to celebrate, so there’s no need for me to partake.”

“Your stomach isn’t feeling well?”

Yuder conspicuously directed his gaze toward the spot where the Baron had been sitting. Traces of alcohol and fruit remained, evidence that he had been eating before standing up.

“…It seems the food I ate may have disagreed with me.”

“Getting sick from eating the food of the Imperial Palace? I would think that this is a serious matter that even His Majesty the Emperor

would be concerned about. Exactly what did you eat? Shouldn’t this require a thorough investigation?”

Baron Durmand was momentarily at a loss for words. As Yuder called the servant over again, the Baron scrambled to excuse himself, saying that as he’d gotten older, his stomach had become sensitive to certain foods.

It was painfully obvious that he was trying to backpedal, but no one present was inclined to let him off the hook so easily.

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Chapter 504

“Isn’t it strange? If the food is potentially harmful, wouldn’t one naturally avoid it from the outset?”

Priscilla Van Tain, who had been silently observing the situation thus far, approached Pruelle and asked with a smile.

“Even with your age, it’s hard to believe that someone who’s attended gatherings like this multiple times would make such a mistake. It’s quite worrisome. Anyway, for the sake of the other guests, shouldn’t we examine the food as Baron Aile suggested?”

Her ability to speak in circles while appearing ignorant was truly remarkable. The eyelids of Baron Durmand, who could not treat her like one of the ordinary Cavalry members because she was the new successor of the Tain family, fluttered slightly.

Maintaining a far more polite demeanor than he’d shown when addressing Pruelle, but not entirely hiding his displeasure, he spoke.

“It seems the heir of the Tain family, who hasn’t even been bestowed the title of Duke yet, is already very interested in external matters.”

“Do you really think it’s such a concern? Baron Durmand, your understanding of what constitutes ‘interest in external matters’ appears to be unusually broad. Is it because you frequently go falcon hunting and thus have expanded your horizons?”

The falcon symbolized the Diarca Ducal House. At her subtle dig connecting the Diarca and Durmand families, the Baron’s expression turned sour.

“I’m not sure what you mean.”

“What meaning could there be? Words are merely words. Misinterpreting intent and harboring doubts is not advisable. By the way, Baron Durmand, I heard for the first time today that you are unwell, and you indeed don’t look well. Are you sure you should remain here?”

Someone near Priscilla chimed in with a subtle smile. Yuder recognized him as a person from a family closely affiliated with Apeto Ducal House, someone he had often clashed with in his previous life as well.

Seeming to decide to side with Tain as tensions appeared likely to arise between the Diarca faction and Tain, he extended a supportive hand.

“The young and new hero from the West is not wrong, is he? If there is really something wrong with the food, who could eat it? Especially in the imperial palace.”

“Didn’t I say that’s not the case? I never claimed that the food in the imperial palace is problematic. Nor am I so unwell that I need immediate treatment!”

As Baron Durmand grimaced at the situation not going his way, others behind him began to chime in, defending him.

Yuder quietly turned his head at the sight. He locked eyes with Priscilla Van Tain, who was speaking to Pruelle while holding her arm.

“…”

After a brief exchange of glances, Yuder slightly bowed his head first. A small smile crept onto Priscilla’s lips. Initially, she had seemed far less warm and more pragmatic compared to Pruelle and Nipollen, but that smile clearly showed their shared lineage.

Even though the Tain family had publicly sided with the Emperor this time, it couldn't have been easy for someone who had not yet received even the Duke title to take such an official stance at an event like this. However, judging by the look in her eyes as she spoke to Pruelle, it wasn't hard to guess why she had stepped forward.

"Yuder, are you alright? Are you hurt?"

"Speak up if something feels off!"

"I'm fine."

As Baron Durmand conversed with other nobles, the Eldore siblings stealthily approached from behind and whispered in hushed tones. Yuder assured them he was fine, but worry still lingered on their faces.

"Really? You never say you're unwell even when you are. How can we trust you?"

"You should be honest, especially in a place like this."

"I am fine, truly. Do I look unwell?"

"…No, you look perfectly healthy."

"See? So relax. If you want to laugh, just laugh."

The Eldore siblings had been concerned when looking at Yuder but had also been suppressing smiles when looking at Baron Durmand. Finally, they covered their mouths and let out genuine laughter.

"To be honest, when Yuder drank that, the Baron's expression was so hilarious that it was hard to keep a straight face."

“I guess he thought Yuder would be too scared to drink it. There’s a limit to how ridiculous you can be.”

“He should have some of this drink himself.”

Yuder had been planning to do just that. He looked down at the glass in his hand, gauging the atmosphere around him.

The disdainful glances directed at the Cavalry members remained, but the mood had changed significantly since Yuder had taken a sip. Whispered comments reached his ears, even from Baron Durmand, who had recoiled from the cup Yuder had extended, denigrating him as no different from ill-mannered commoners.

Raising one’s voice against those considered lower was not considered ridiculous among them. However, showing even a hint of confusion or weakness was.

It was as though they were a pack of animals, all puffing up their fur to avoid showing their tender underbellies. Merely by accepting the invitation to share the drugged drink, Yuder had managed to drag Baron Durmand and Duke Diarcas entourage into his level.

‘If I assure them once more that I’m fine, it’ll be a good time to offer another drink.’

Baron Durmand knew the drink had been spiked with a stomach drug and would not touch it. Yuder planned to defiantly drink another glass in front of him and then summon those who would truly investigate the matter.

Just as he was relishing the capture of his prey, he felt a gaze crawling up the back of his neck. Turning his head, he saw Kiolle, fidgeting like a dog needing to relieve itself. Alternating glances between Yuder’s face and the drink he had consumed, Kiolle’s eyes were rolling frantically. It seemed as though he’d realized this was a trap set by his own father.

His continuously blushing face and incomprehensible mutterings were somewhat amusing, but Yuder decided not to bother deciphering them and shifted his gaze. Surprisingly, it landed on Prince Katchian, sitting on a staircase platform beside him.

"…"

Katchian looked at Yuder with a curious smile, his half-lowered eyes and tilted head revealing emotions he couldn't hide. Instead of displeasure, the Crown Prince showed blatant curiosity towards Yuder, who was rebelling against his own power base in Diarca.

A brief yet eternal moment passed, and Yuder averted his gaze. It was a natural move, as if he had never seen the Crown Prince to begin with.

"Enough."

Then, as if he had been waiting for this moment, Duke Diarca put down the glass he had been holding and spoke. Though his comment was brief and not raised in volume, there was an odd weight to his words. Instantaneously, everyone, including Baron Durmand, fell silent. Even the Cavalry members, who had been whispering insults under their breaths, clamped their mouths shut, startled by the sudden gravitas.

"What could be the point of a day meant to celebrate the Empire's escape from danger being so marred in my memory? Perhaps it would be best to put an end to things here."

A few people tensed their shoulders at the sharp sensation that discreetly yet effectively pricked their skin. Several nobles who had been pressing Baron Durmand began to retreat, tongues clicking in disdain. Durmand, however, seemed visibly invigorated.

It was just the opinion of one person, but it was as if everyone agreed. Such was the gravitas of Duke Diarca, something that the

nobles of the capital had grown accustomed to acknowledging.

However, Yuder had no intention of letting the matter conclude as it stood.

“Does that mean, sir, that you’re suggesting we halt the investigation into the food and drink consumed by Baron Durmand?”

The atmosphere among the nobles suddenly turned icy once again. Duke Diarca’s gaze shifted to Yuder. The duke bore an appearance that could, if adorned with a long beard and aged a few more decades, seem sagely and even more personable.

With an inscrutable expression, the aging duke smiled.

“…I, too, was well aware that Durmand hasn’t been in the best of health recently. There was assuredly no issue with the food.”

Duke Diarca, who effortlessly confirmed the rumor about Durmand’s poor health as something ‘he also knew,’ slowly lifted the corners of his lips.

“If we deem there to be a problem, we can always set the food aside and investigate later. It’s not too late.”

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Chapter 505

It was as good as a declaration of “Let’s not discuss this matter further.” None of the nobles present dared to counter the statement. Sitting alone at the top of the staircase behind Duke Diarca, even the Crown Prince seemed to tacitly agree, as if he had heard nothing.

This was the power and influence that Duke Diarca held. At a time when other noble families were not faring well, his weight in the situation was incomparable to anyone else’s. For the Duke to even converse with a commoner was already remarkable; it was only natural that anyone less would be treated as insignificant and ignored. Everyone thought as much.

The Commoners of the Cavalry have made some impressive advances by involving an outsider… but we’ll let this go.

It would be a relief if I don’t hear news about that male escort being killed on his way home tonight.

“The only person who can make that decision would be His Majesty the Emperor, don’t you think?”

Therefore, when Yuder responded in such a manner, many doubted their own ears.

Yuder stood in his spot, his demeanor unchanged from earlier. No shift in his expression could be discerned as he faced Duke Diarca. It was as if, in Yuder’s eyes, he was no different from Baron Durmand. The nobles present were shocked.

A few nobles looked at Yuder’s face as if they were looking at a man who would soon be dead, whispering among themselves.

With a steely gaze, Yuder looked directly into the eyes of the aging Duke and continued.

“To speak frankly, the one who brought an unauthorized gift is also the person who abruptly rejected my proposal for a toast. We cannot simply overlook this inexplicable situation based on someone’s word. This is because the safety of His Majesty the Emperor and all the attendees is at stake.”

To dare refer to the Duke as ‘someone!’ Nobles loyal to the Diarca family glared at Yuder with faces flushed in suppressed fury and disbelief.

“…”

“However, aside from the immediate need for an investigation, I have my suspicions. Perhaps the person who asked for trust in me and the Cavalry has no trust in us. Maybe that’s why you’re avoiding the toast despite no issues”

Yuder directed a chilling smile and his gaze toward Baron Durmand. His slowly uttered words spread around like the chill of a winter wind.

“Just a thought.”

“What nonsense are you spouting?” Baron Durmand shouted. Even if it were true, he had to vehemently deny it here.

“Is it?”

Yuder spoke as he twirled the cup in his hand, just like Duke Diarca had done earlier.

“Then prove it.”

Instead of flatly denying it, make everyone else see and believe.

Just as Yuder has done.

Baron Durmand's eyebrows twitched as if he had heard an unsaid implication.

"We have many capable members in our Cavalry. With their skills, there's no need to call for an outside investigation. If Baron Durmand would kindly lend us the food he consumed and his hand, we could solve everything."

Thud. As if struck by an invisible force, everyone's head seemed to lower. Baron Durmand clenched his fists, as if Yuder would grab his hands right there.

"What are you talking about? An investigation by the Cavalry? Are you threatening me? What do you intend to do?"

"Curious about our investigative methods? Then grant us permission to proceed."

Yuder had said nothing about how he planned to utilize the members of the Cavalry who had special abilities. This silence cast confusion and uncertainty into the minds of nobles who knew little about the Awakeners.

Most of the Cavalry are like you, having only the power to destroy things, or so I heard. Was I mistaken?

You're bluffing by saying that difficult tasks can be easily accomplished even with magic tools.

Yet, even while thinking this, a chill ran down their spines whenever they caught sight of the massive monster standing far behind Yuder. Could there be truth to his claims? Such were the thoughts that crossed their minds.

“Do you think you can insult me like this and pay for it when my innocence comes to light?”

Baron Durmand muttered, grinding his teeth. His eyes were quite menacing, but Yuder simply chuckled briefly.

“What is there that can’t be repaid?”

“How dare you”

“So, do you have an answer yet?”

“And what if I can’t accept?”

To this question, laden with malice and anger, Yuder responded calmly.

“If Baron Durmand has no intention of cooperating with the investigation, then I intend to start by examining the wine I’ve been given.”

“Why would you!”

“Well, I’d like to know why you’re so reluctant to drink this wine.”

“I can’t allow that!”

“It’s already in my possession, so my examination doesn’t require your permission.”

Baron Durmand felt uneasy, as if Yuder knew something yet also seemed ignorant.

Could it be that he knows the wine was drugged? But that’s impossible.

The gifted wine had failed to produce any effects. It had been proven safe, so there was no cause for suspicion.

The drug added was potent enough to cause immediate reddening of the skin, severe abdominal pain, and vomitingsymptoms that could easily be mistaken for poisoning. It was prepared carefully to look like normal wine, and it was inconceivable that Yuder and his Cavalry were aware of it.

If they had known, they wouldn’t have drunk it. But the ambiguous behavior and the lack of an adverse reaction raised suspicions. Confused thoughts ran wildly through Durmand’s head, before suddenly coming to a halt.

Could there be a traitor among us who helped prepare this?

It couldn’t be. They had checked multiple times. It wasn’t initially his responsibility, but he had gotten involved personally to please Duke Diarca. There had been no mistakes.

But what if there really was a traitor?

He couldn’t ignore the growing self-doubt, and neither would Duke Diarca.

Baron Durmand felt a cold chill at his back. Before he could determine its source, another noble standing next to Duke Diarca exclaimed loudly.

“Baron Durmand, why not simply drink it yourself then? To ease Duke Diarca’s burden and keep the party going, it seems like the best option.”

“If you’re so eloquent, surely a sip of wine won’t be an issue?”

These were the people who had prepared this event with Baron Durmand. They stepped in immediately to alleviate Duke Diarca’s suspicions after witnessing Yuder’s strange behavior.

If Baron Durmand drank the wine and remained unharmed, it would mean that there was indeed a traitor among them. But what would it mean if the opposite were true?

No, even if I drank, could I ever truly escape the chains of this suspicion?

Baron Durmand realized he had been cornered. He couldn't understand why things had turned out this way so suddenly, but he was too afraid to refuse. The gaze of Duke Diarca, who silently stared at him, was dreadfully intimidating.

"Very well… it seems you're not wrong."

Finally, Duke Diarca broke his silence. The words that came from his lips were as damning as a death sentence.

"Bring a new glass."

"Yes."

Those around immediately fetched a new glass. Yuder Aile courteously poured new wine into it. The sound of the liquid dropping seemed like the flowing of a river in Hell.

"Take it."

"…"

Durmand hesitated, unable to readily extend his hand. Duke Diarca urged him on.

"Durmand, drink."

"…Your Grace."

Durmand desperately called out to Duke Diarca, but the Duke's expression remained unchanged. Reluctantly, Durmand took the

glass. Careful not to let his hand tremble, he brought it close to his lips. Instead of the sweet aroma typical of wine, a bitter, pungent smell wafted from it, almost rotting his nose.

The claim that no one had ever been harmed by drinking Quelochet was a lie. Baron Durmand had never once tasted this wine himself.

'…'

Durman's breathing quickened. Moments later, he braced himself and took a sip. Everyone watched as his Adam's apple bobbed.

And then, moments later,

"Ugh!"

A red rash spread across Baron Durmand's face and body, and he vomited violently. He collapsed right there and then.

Just before losing consciousness, the last thing he saw was Yuder Aile's unfathomably dark eyes.

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The fallen Baron Durmand was immediately carried away by his attendants. The servants swiftly cleaned up the vomit that had spattered in all directions, but a mishap had occurred; the clothes and shoes of numerous nobles close to him were soiled because he had suddenly vomited.

Among them was also Duke Diarca.

“My God, the Duke’s shoes are ruined!”

“What are you all fussing about? Are the floors more important than His Grace’s health?”

Amidst those who were making a bigger fuss than the person involved, the nobles who had just been encouraging Baron Durmand to drink were at a loss as to what to do next.

‘What on earth happened?’

It appeared the poison had taken effect, but Yuder, who had drunk more before, seemed perfectly fine. It was hard to make sense of the situation.

And Duke Diarca felt the same.

‘Why is that man perfectly fine?’

Was there a traitor among them, or was it the absurd notion that this man of common birth was immune to poison?

The situation was highly suspicious, but as they had to hide the fact that Baron Durmand had collapsed due to the ingested poison and not just an allergic reaction to Quelochet, further investigation

seemed difficult. The priority was to distance themselves from Baron Durmand.

With a wave of his hand, Duke Diarca dismissed the nobles who were about to clean his shoes in a fluster. Those who caught his gaze immediately understood what he wanted.

“Your Grace, Duke Diarca, how distraught you must be.”

“It’s just that I had stepped in to help an old acquaintance, and to think this would happen… My heart feels like it might stop if I think about how shocked you must be. Shall we leave for now?”

“Yes… perhaps it’s best.”

“Are you leaving then?”

It was then that Yuder spoke calmly. Although the Duke didn’t respond, Yuder continued nonchalantly.

“Isn’t it a bit early to leave? I thought you might be curious as to why Baron Durmand collapsed while I remain unaffected.”

“…”

At those words, Duke Diarca, along with most of the others, turned their heads. Yuder casually shook the wine bottle he was holding.

“Do you happen to know why I was severely injured while dealing with the monster in the West? It was due to the poison it carried.”

People’s eyes shifted toward the giant head of Pethuamet behind Yuder. Could that terrifying monster not only be enormous but also venomous?

“Having been heavily affected by the poison and then recovering, I seem to have developed a significant resistance to poisoned

substances. I suppose I have the Emperor, my Commander, and my excellent comrades to thank for my fortunate survival.”

Of course, half of this was a lie. But the modesty paid off, as the faces of various nobles twisted in displeasure.

It was better to hide the weakness of being vulnerable to monsters, while only half-revealing the strength of being resistant to most poisons. After all, the term ‘significant’ is inherently subjective.

The more the enemies found it difficult to gauge Yuder’s limitations, the less likely his comrades were to be in danger.

“Thank you for involving me,” Yuder said.

“The reason why Baron Durmand, who was said to never had any side effects from drinking Quelochet, yet immediately vomited and fainted after this sip, and why I’m still perfectly fineno doubt, they all share the same answer,” he added.

If Yuder hadn’t been resistant to poison, he would have been the first to collapse and vomit. His icy eyes said as much.

The faces of those who had prepared the drinks and medications along with Baron Durmand turned pale.

“Resistant to poison? That’s absurd.”

“No, it has to be a lie. This is clearly an inside betrayal.”

“Does this mean that the Cavalry will continue to investigate the matter?” A noble, neither from Diarca’s side nor friendly toward Yuder, asked with interest.

“Yes. We plan to thoroughly investigate any secrets hidden in this drink, including the person who gifted it.”

“…”

“What does this have to do with Duke Diarca? If you suspect Baron Durmand, do as you will. If you’re going to investigate, let the Cavalry handle it!”

“Such uncouth manners.”

Voices rose in protest from behind the silent Duke Diarca.

Suddenly, the Duke, who had been standing quietly, raised his hand to silence everyone after someone whispered politely in his ear.

“Do as you wish.”

“Your Grace…”

“I too am deeply disappointed in Durmand. I’m tired; let’s honor the Crown Prince and retire for the day.”

Straightening his back, Duke Diarca brushed past Yuder. Following him, many nobles also disappeared, as if they had no more business there. When the Duke mentioned that he would pay his respects to the Crown Prince before leaving, the prince showed a faint smile, tinged with regret.

“So soon? That’s unfortunate.”

The nobles from the side of Duke Diarca felt that the expression on the Crown Prince’s face was somehow a bit different from before, although it was hard to pinpoint exactly why.

‘Is he still holding onto a grudge? Normally, he would leave as soon as the Duke departs.’

Was there still a problem between Duke Diarca and Crown Prince Katchian, even after everyone thought the relationship had been mended? What impact could this have in the future? With the

Cavalry making significant strides and their newfound fame, this subtlety was not a good sign for those aligned with Duke Diarca.

While thoughts raced through many heads, members of the Cavalry gathered around Yuder as soon as Duke Diarca had left.

“Yuder! About earlier… was it okay to speak so bluntly? Won’t there be some sort of reprisal? Especially since…”

“Yuder, you kept it a secret from us that you had a resistance to poison! We were really worried when we thought you got hurt! It’s good that you didn’t, but…”

“Don’t worry. I’m truly alright,” Yuder reassured his comrades with a brief reply, brushing off their concerns. Then he turned his head toward someone who had been quietly standing in a corner.

“Gakane.”

“…”

Gakane hesitated, lifting his head before lowering his eyes again. The other members seemed to understand why Yuder had called Gakane and subtly cleared the space around them.

“…Ah, should we go dance again? Want to join me?”

“Sure.”

“I want to eat some fruit. It looked delicious earlier.”

“You still want to eat that after seeing someone throw up? You’re truly worthy of being in the Cavalry.”

“And yet you already have a fork in your hand.”

“I had no choice. That’s a separate matter. I didn’t get to eat breakfast because of all the preparations.”

Yuder moved through the space left open by the retreating members and grasped Gakane's shoulder.

"Thanks for earlier."

"…"

Gakane broke his silence, lifting his head once more. His eyes, tinged with a shade of green, shimmered with complicated emotions.

"I feel like I haven't done anything to deserve your thanks. I wasn't any help to you at all."

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Gakane's words might not have been entirely wrong. Despite stepping up to help Yuder, he hadn't been much of a help, that was true.

But that didn't mean he wanted to admit it had been a pointless endeavor.

"Your judgment that you were of no help is your own. Not everything in the world can be assessed solely by its outcome."

"Right… if you're saying this out of pity for me, thanks, but it's okay. You don't have to worry. The matter has been resolved… that's all that counts."

A bitter smile briefly touched the corners of Gakane's mouth before vanishing like a mirage. He didn't seem to take Yuder's words to heart. The following conversation was no different. His face remained vacant, as if his thoughts were elsewhere, and he emanated a deep sense of melancholy.

'…His condition seems more severe than I thought.'

Yuder suddenly recalled what Enon had once said. Wasn't it that people like Gakane, who are sensitive, should not talk when others are around?

If Yuder had been in Gakane's position, he wouldn't have cared one bit. Yet, he understood how difficult it could be to discuss family matters, especially under the malicious scrutiny of others, given the circumstances. Talking further would not change the situation.

Yuder broke the silence and called Gakane's name.

“Gakane.”

“…”

“Shall we dance?”

“What?”

“Follow me.”

Gakane looked around, puzzled. Before he could step back, Yuder quickly grabbed his arm and led him away. Members of the Cavalry who were preparing to dance and enjoying their conversations glanced at them with mild surprise but said nothing.

Soon, the music began. The loud instruments drowned out any conversations from others. Yuder tightly gripped Gakane’s hand, enough to cause slight discomfort.

“Ah.”

“Focus on the dance, not on anything else.”

“…”

“Do you understand?”

“Yes.”

As Yuder spoke firmly, the tension in Gakanes eyebrows seemed to soften. His tightly sealed lips appeared to tremble slightly. As he had claimed to know all the dances, Gakane danced quite well. Despite clearly not being in the mood for dancing, he moved seamlessly, a testament to years of experience in such arts.

How long did they dance in silence?

Suddenly, a soft voice reached Yuder’s ears.

“You seem really strong.”

“…”

“How wonderful it would have been if I could be like that too.”

Repeating his murmurs, Gakane took a spin and then, as he returned, spoke again.

“Even when you told me not to come, I went ahead anyway, and hearing about my family choked me up. I was paralyzed, unable to think. Just… ashamed of everything.”

“…”

“Everything Baron Durmand said wasn’t entirely wrong.”

A bitter emotion seemed to rise over Gakane’s face, as if chewing and swallowing a bitter herb.

“The truth is, my family has nothing left but its name. We tried to arrange marriages with merchant families who desired it. And for that, we suffered all kinds of humiliation in the South. I didn’t expect people in this far-off capital to know about it as well.”

Gakane began to ramble disjointedly. When Yuder pieced together what he was saying, it revealed a story of a fallen noble family, more impoverished and miserable than Yuder had remembered.

“Hey, Yuder, do you remember when I said I once tried to join the knights?”

In his younger years, Gakane had aspired to be a knight and a general, to make a name for himself like the ancestors who had brought fame to his family. On the strength of his name, he had managed to join a couple of renowned knightly orders as a young

apprentice, even as a squire. However, no matter how hard he persevered, he could not rise through the ranks.

It was an era where having money and a fine sword mattered more than passion when it came to becoming a knight. And Gakane had neither. He didn’t possess overwhelming swordsmanship skills that could compensate for his impoverished background. There was simply no mentor willing to fully train someone who had neither money nor talent.

Eventually, as he reached the age limit for apprenticeship, Gakane accepted the reality that he could not become a knight. He returned home to help uplift his family and began to look for his own way to survive. The easiest path seemed to be accepting various matchmaking offers that came his way.

Though his family had fallen into ruin, there were still plenty of wealthy individuals who were interested in the Bolunwald family’s castle. Putting aside his sword and training clothes for formal attire, Gakane started to attend matchmaking events. His parents and siblings told him he didn’t have to, but he couldn’t stand the thought of doing nothing and being a burden.

“I saw a lot of matches back then. But since I had nothing to offer, and wasn’t particularly cooperative either… I was never a priority in that market,” Gakane’s eyes subtly reddened.

“I received quite a few offers, you know, for secret relationships if not for marriage.”

“Did you just ignore them?” Yuder finally spoke up. Gakane let out a bitter laugh.

“What choice did I have? What could I do?”

There was a social expectation that those inheriting a castle should marry someone of equal standing. Especially for a house like

the Bolunwald, which had a history of glory, engaging in such affairs would only invite scorn. Furthermore, Gakane's good looks had only fueled malicious rumors, which took on wings and spread dramatically, becoming more embellished among the southern nobility.

"But back then, I thought it was okay. I figured I'd never associate with those people again, and that I'd just marry someoneanyoneand that would be the end of it."

But life seldom goes as planned. A few months later, Gakane heard that a vacancy had opened up in one of the knightly orders he had once served as an apprentice. And he met every qualification to fill it. It was a miraculous opportunity.

"But they rejected me. Said they couldn't let someone who'd forgotten the weight of his own name and lineage into their ranks. Just like that, I was cast out. Ha."

The order wasn't willing to accept someone with a bad reputation. Despite attempts to correct the distorted rumors by reaching out to influential people among the southern nobility, he failed. There was no one left to stand up for Gakane.

"If I hadn't Awakened miraculously back then, and if there hadn't been a recruiting notice for the Cavalry… it would have been truly bleak."

Yuder recalled the run-down inn in the capital where he had first met Gakane. He had known even then that Gakane was the scion of a fallen house, but he had never truly felt the weight of it, given Gakane's cheerful demeanor.

But the reality was that Gakane had nowhere else to go; his circumstances were that dire. He had pinned his last hopes on coming here.

In the festive season of harvest, when everyone was happily dressed in formal attire, Gakane was the exception; he never seemed quite pleased. Even in dancing, something he claimed he was so accustomed to that practice was unnecessary, his expression was rather gloomy. These memories came flooding back.

“Yuder. That’s why I hoped you wouldn’t have to go through what I did. You were the first to bring light into my life when I was on the edge of the abyss, and you’re my first real friend since I got here.”

””

“Even though my advice might be useless My desire to be of help to you has always been sincere. I wanted to be strong like you and worked really hard for it. I was truly happy when you proposed working together this time”

Muttering, Gakane let out a sigh.

“But it seems like I really can’t be of any help. It’s ridiculous. I’m just I’m so ashamed of everything. The fact that we’re having this conversation right now and that people are watching us”

“Gakane.”

“Knowing you could solve everything better on your own, and still unnecessarily stepping forward, that’s what I’m most ashamed of right now.”

“Gakane!”

Yuder interrupted, calling out Gakane’s name before the shame could deepen on his face.

It was the first time Yuder had seen the usually cheerful guy appear this downcast, and he didn’t know what to say to break the ice. He was at a loss for words.

‘If I were Kishiar, I wouldn’t have to worry about this I’d rather fight ten guys like Baron Durmand.’

Yuder exhaled deeply. Even in that sigh, he could feel Gakane’s shoulders flinch.

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Chapter 508

Gakane often said that Yuder had shared his light with him, but the truth was that Yuder hadn't helped him out of any extraordinary benevolence. It was merely his first attempt to take a different path from his previous life, and the presence of past experiences and memories gave him a bit more certainty in his decision. That was all there was to it.

'And yet…'

Yuder glanced at his loosely held hand, collected his thoughts, and opened his mouth.

He wasn't gifted in offering comforting words, so he felt he should take another approach.

"Gakane, I didn't help you out of some grand intention, contrary to what you think."

"I know. To you, there's no great difference between helping Kanna and the others, and helping me."

"No, what I want to say is that my being strong and my personality are two different issues."

Yuder replied firmly, locking eyes with him.

"I'm someone who doesn't care what others say as long as it doesn't interfere with what I have to do. It's not because I'm strong; I've been like this even before my Awakening. I've suffered losses due to this trait, but it hasn't changed and probably never will."

He had even faced execution due to this personality. A fact Gakane was likely unaware of.

“…”

“This isn’t strength. It’s just having an incredibly stubborn and unpleasant personality. If you were like me, I think it would be difficult for us to get along.”

Gakane Bolunwald, being stubborn and having an unpleasant personality, was an unimaginable combination.

“You say you’re embarrassed for not being of any help and about your past. But if we’re measuring shame, shouldn’t I be the more ashamed one? I nearly ruined the party’s atmosphere, and one person even fainted and had to be carried away.”

“That’s not…

“Yet, I’m not particularly ashamed. I did what I wanted to do, and if I could go back, I would do it again.”

Upon hearing Yuder’s unsettlingly calm words, Gakane blinked a few times.

“Think about it. If you could go back in time to earlier, wouldn’t you still come forward to help me, surrounded as I was?”

“…”

Gakane, who had said he was embarrassed for stepping in even though he knew Yuder could handle it himself, couldn’t readily answer. Yuder felt a faint strength enter the fingers of the hand Gakane was holding and asked again.

“So, what will it be?”

“If I could go back to earlier, I think I would still step forward to help you. But… I wouldn’t be as foolish as I was. Like that gentleman earlier, I would try to do it more… skillfully.”

The words that finally came from Gakane were not unexpected for Yuder. He was a person of such nature: considerate, attentive, and in some ways, inexhaustibly persevering.

There was no need for someone already endowed with his own strengths to become just like Yuder.

Yuder nodded and the corners of his lips faintly rose.

“Good. Then do it like that next time.”

“Next time?”

“It doesn’t seem like these kinds of situations will end with this one event.”

“Do you think I could step forward again, even after what happened today?”

“Why wouldn’t you be able to? I do as I please, so you can do as you please too.”

“What are you saying? You told me not to intervene earlier.”

Gakane furrowed his brows, his expression hovering between a smile and a frown.

“I did say not to intervene, but I also thanked you for doing so, didn’t I?”

Yuder replied brazenly, then added a moment later.

“I’ve lived alone for a long time, unlike you, and I’m used to taking initiative on my own. When I told you and the others to stay back earlier, it was not only because I was confident I could handle it alone, but that was also a big part of it.”

Yuder was accustomed to thrusting himself to the front lines when facing enemies, leaving others behind. Solving problems himself was not only quicker and more reassuring, but also due in part to his lack of trust in others.

This trait was even exhibited when playing games. One of the phrases that Kishiar had repeatedly said while teaching him strategy games in his previous life was to stop relying solely on one tactic against opponents.

So naturally, he thought it best to throw himself into the fray alone this time as well, facing off against Duke Diarca and Baron Durmand.

However, when Gakane disregarded his silent command to stay back, and when Pruelle intervened, followed by Priscilla's aid, and finally when a throng of Cavalry members arrived, Yuder felt something different than before.

Objectively, the situation hadn't particularly benefited him, but the enthusiasm of the people that had gathered felt like some sort of protective shield around him. It was a sense of responsibility he hadn't felt when facing multiple enemies alone, a suddenly clarified reality, and a certain fervent energy that circled his fingertips before dissipating.

"I told you earlier, I don't care what others say. I'm going to thank you anyway, and I already forgot what the unconscious guy said. If you're bothered by his words, I am prepared to threaten him to keep his mouth shut until he dies."

Gakane's eyelids trembled slightly, knowing full well that Yuder could indeed do so.

"Why… would you go so far? Do you pity me?"

"Do you really see me as someone who would go that far just because I find someone pitiable, even after our conversation?"

“Then?”

Gakane Bolunwald was an irreplaceable Cavalry member and a colleague. But that reason didn’t seem persuasive enough for him at this moment. He wanted something different, something that wouldn’t apply to other colleagues like Kanna or Ever.

Yuder closed his mouth for a moment and then opened it again.

“When I first came to the capital for the Cavalry recruitment test.”

What he finally dredged up was a vague, very old memory from his past life.

“To be honest, I didn’t have a good first impression of the capital. It was a bit scary, and I didn’t want to talk to anyone. I was planning to just take the exam and leave if I failed.”

Gakane blinked awkwardly. The Yuder he knew now had changed since then, making it difficult to understand, but it was true.

“I know that I’m not someone people easily approach. I’m not sociable, and my personality isn’t exactly winning. Most people who meet me for the first time find me intimidating or unpleasant.”

“…”

“But you spoke to me without hesitation, didn’t you?”

There aren’t many people who can speak to Yuder without hesitation upon a first meeting even now. Although the Yuder of his past life had brushed off Gakane’s friendly approach, the fact that it remained in some corner of his mind even after death and resurrection indicated that it had left a significant impression.

And also, the meaningless death of Gakane, who had shown such effortless kindness.

The conversation he had with him at that time was, from Yuders perspective, a conversation with another person after a very long time.

Based on his previous life, it was a conversation with a peer stranger after several years, and in this life, it was the first proper conversation Yuder had since coming back from the dead.

Yuder looked at Gakane, who seemed lost in thought, and spoke.

“I’m glad the person I talked to at that time was you. That’s all.”

Gakane remained silent for a while. When he finally spoke, there was a slight flush around his eyes.

“Does that mean you consider me a good friend as well, Yuder?”

Instead of replying, Yuder simply nodded.

Suddenly, a strange feeling crept in, oddly stirring his insides.

Back then, he had no idea that Gakane would become such an important and close comrade, nor did he foresee doing something he’d never done beforecomforting anotherfor the sake of Gakane, even after achieving his initial goal of saving him.

‘I probably wouldn’t have kept hearing such words in the first place.’

From the moment he decided to save Gakane right after coming back to life, up to now, many things had happened. Yuder had always been focused on the changes in others, but for the first time, he partially realized that there had been changes in himself too, excluding areas related to Kishiar.

Odd as it was, the feeling wasn’t unpleasant.

“Gakane. I’m not good with words, so I don’t know what to say, but I know one thing. Whatever happened today won’t affect your growing skills or the things you’ll be capable of doing in the future. Just remember that.”

Whatever rumors Baron Durmand spread about Gakane, whether he was born into a fallen noble family or had tried to sell his honornone of it had any bearing on what he had achieved so far. The future would be no different.

“Understood. Thank you.”

With Gakane’s brief response, the conversation came to an end.

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Yuder’s eyes, as vivid as a road wetted by rain, no longer avoided the gaze that met them.

“You know, Yuder, one of my goals since joining the Cavalry was to be acknowledged as your closest friend.”

“Is that so?”

The sentiment he’d just felt vanished in an instant, replaced by the notion that it was a truly peculiar aim. Gakane, catching Yuder’s expression, probed, “You find it hard to understand, dont you?”

“I was confident in my tenacity, but it still felt like a challenging goal. But hearing what you said just now made me feel even happier than achieving that,” Gakane said, his usual shyness and brightness slowly returning to his expression.

Seeing that Gakane looked much better than before, Yuder simply nodded in agreement without saying a word. Gakane also refrained from adding anything more on the subject, and instead turned his head, as if he had noticed something.

“Ah, it seems the Commander has arrived.”

Yuders eyes followed immediately. The entrance area had become somewhat noisy, and soon, a tall man stepped inside. Kishiar, whose height made him stand out like a majestic tree amidst a meadow, drew everyone’s attention as he re-entered.

Whether they held him in esteem or not, everyone’s eyes were on Kishiar, even Katchian La Orr. Yuder was sharply reminded of how Kishiar could commandingly capture the attention of others.

Having always been by his side, seeing him from a distance was a rare experience for Yuder. Watching him quietly, he saw Kishiar turn his head and scan the surroundings after exchanging a few words with the chief steward.

His gaze stopped precisely where Yuder was standing. Upon locking eyes, Kishiar waved his hand in a grand gesture, his demeanor overtly cordial. The few remaining retainers of Duke Diarca, who had yet to leave their seats, muttered amongst themselves, their brows furrowed. However, they were now clearly in the minority.

Their complaints and anger, their insults and slandersall failed to affect the evenings celebration.

Suddenly, Gakane spoke up. “Yuder, you mentioned that today would present an opportunity you’ve been waiting for.”

“That’s right,” Yuder murmured, without breaking his gaze from Kishiar.

“Now I think I understand what you meant.”

Gakane grinned in a way he hadnt in a long time. He patted Yuder’s back a couple of times, gently, before heading back to where the other members were.

Yuder began walking toward Kishiar.

“You’ve arrived.”

“Yes. The hall has become quite clean in my absence.”

Kishiar greeted Yuder and whispered with a smile

Yuder answered calmly, looking around at the seats, which had emptied by more than half after the departure of Duke Diarca and his

followers.

“I did put in some effort in cleaning. Though there’s still some dust left, it should be enough for everyone to enjoy.”

“I heard that even from where His Majesty is, my assistant is diligently cleaning.”

Kishiar’s eyes, which had been leisurely until then, changed slightly at that moment.

“I wanted to hurry back and help with the cleaning, but it seems the dust moved faster than I did.”

“…”

Was Kishiar implying that Duke Diarcas departure ahead of his return was no coincidence? Yuder recalled that just before Duke Diarca had announced his departure, someone had rushed over to whisper something in his ear.

Ah, it was around that time that news reached him that Kishiar had detached himself from the Emperor’s side.

Even Yuder, who was Kishiar’s closest aide, and the Cavalry had only heard that he was going to meet Emperor Keilusa. They had not been told when he would return. Such movements of the royal family were inherently supposed to be secretive. Yet, Duke Diarca acted as if it was only natural to immediately hear such news and act upon it.

This essentially meant that everything happening within the palace could directly reach his ears.

Yuder felt a chilling realization that the influence of Duke Diarca, including Crown Prince Katchian, extended like a network of veins deep into the palace.

This palace, supposedly the home of the Emperor and the imperial family, was now a place where none of them could freely roam.

‘So that’s why he made the unusual excuse that he was tired and retreated so easily.’

Suppressing the uncomfortable surge of emotion as if he’d been struck on the back of the head, Yuder quietly asked,

“…Did your visit to His Majesty the Emperor go well, Commander?”

“It went as well as it could have,” Kishiar responded with an ambiguous answer.

“He was rather surprised that I used the relaxed rules concerning the second gender as I did. He seemed quite flustered, but he understood eventually. Still, he’ll probably want to see the face of my assistant once more soon.”

So, in other words, although it was okay to dance Avitan for the first time in the history of the imperial palace, the fact that Kishiar danced with Yuder, a man and omega, was a more shocking event than expected for the Emperor and Empress.

‘It’s not like I didn’t consider the possibility.’

Plans involving people don’t always go as thought. Yuder knew the Diarca family’s future and the nobles gathered here, but like them, even the doting Emperor and Empress would have parts hard to convince just by Kishiar’s words.

Yuder nodded, keeping his facial expression unchanged.

“I see. Understood. So, will you proceed with the next steps now, Commander?”

Dealing with Duke Diarca and Emperor Keilusa didn't mean their tasks were over. Yuder's gaze drifted toward the steps where Katchian La Orr sat. There stood Kiolle, his eyes half-gone as if he couldn't endure the shocking events any longer.

Now that Duke Diarca had left, the time to snag him for a conversation was perfect. Yuder planned to signal Kiolle while Kishiar was busy holding the attention of Katchian and the others.

"No."

"Excuse me?"

"I said I've been drinking."

Yuder's mind, spinning with tasks to come, momentarily halted at the unexpected answer. He closed and opened his eyes, staring at the smiling face looking down at him. Kishiar gently leaned his head toward Yuder's ear, adopting a more sultry and gentle demeanor than before.

To any outsider, it would seem as if Duke Peletta was simply fixing the messy hair of his assistant, but the red cloth wrapped around his arm skillfully concealed Yuder's presence from anyone's view.

"The Quelochet liquor is dangerous enough on its own. If something's been added to it, there's no need for further discussion. I've never even heard that you developed a tolerance to poison after recovering from a monster-inflicted injury. Can you explain?"

Yuder was quietly surprised at the level of detail being discussed about the events that had transpired here. It seemed that not only Duke Diarca was adept at knowing what happened within the imperial palace as if it were in the palm of his hand.

“…I once mentioned that I don’t get easily intoxicated by most alcohol. Do you remember? The reason is the same.”

Yuder made eye contact with Kishiar, aiming for a brief and clear explanation.

“To be precise, it’s not a tolerance developed after being injured by a monster, but something I’ve had since my Awakening. Unless it’s related to my ‘weakness,’ nothing makes me drunk.”

“I understand that Quelochet contains some elements related to that ‘weakness’?”

Not a trace of amusement could be seen in the vividly glowing red pupils. Kishiar’s keen eyes seemed to pierce through everything, making sure not to miss even a small detail in Yuder’s words.

“Yes, I’m aware. However, I judged that the amount was too small to have any effect. And indeed, it didn’t, did it? I’m fine.”

“Your body temperature is higher than usual. Even so?”

“It would only have an effect similar to being slightly tipsy.”

“…”

In the ensuing silence, the fingers that had been slowly running through Yuder’s hair finally came to a halt.

“It seems my assistant already knew about that drink.”

“…Yes.”

“Did you also know that drink would be served today?”

Yuder didn’t answer. Although he wasn’t entirely certain, it had been within the realm of his expectations. To answer clearly on this

point seemed difficult, as it would start to involve details from his past life.

“I thought you seemed more confident than usual.”

Kishiar closed his eyes briefly and then opened them again. Moments later, he relaxed his shoulders, reverting back to the same Duke Peletta he had always been.

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“Even on a joyous day like this, overindulging in liquor isn’t wise. You should take a brief rest in the lounge.”

Though they pretended not to watch, the onlookers pricked up their ears at the booming voice of Duke Peletta.

“I’ll be sending Enon and Lusan after you soon. If you want to dance some more, do it there. This is an order.”

Facing a gaze that seemed teasing yet serious, Yuder let out a soft sigh.

Telling him to dance there likely meant first confirming he was in good health before handling the matters with Kiolle. It was a typical Kishiar la Orr method of dealing with issues: not obstructing your goals but expressing concern all the same.

“Understood.”

Yuder obediently nodded and headed towards the exit. As if by coincidence, he stopped to ask Kiolle, who was standing at the bottom of the stairs.

“May I ask you something?”

“What, what?”

Caught off guard, Kiolle stumbled back as if he had discovered a bug under his feet. The ornamental sword at his waist clanged against his kneecap. Grimacing in pain, he clenched his teeth but didn’t make a sound.

“Do you know which lounge is currently empty?”

Kiolle was standing right in front of the hallway that led to the lounges. Whipping his head in that direction, he seemed to gasp excessively, as if he had just realized this was a signal from Yuder. To any other onlooker, it would have seemed as if Kiolle was appalled and enraged at being questioned by a commoner. But Yuder clearly saw the fear in his eyes.

‘He’s making a fuss because he doesn’t want to look suspicious.’

“I-it’s all empty!”

His voice cracked as if he were grinding his teeth while speaking.

“Then any room will do. Thank you.”

Without hesitation, Yuder headed into the first lounge. He felt two piercing gazes on his back. One was undoubtedly from Kiolle, and the other was…

‘Katchian La Orr.’

Yuder sat down on a luxurious sofa in a lounge spacious enough for about ten people to comfortably rest. The scrutinizing gaze disappeared, but Katchian’s visage, which had been watching him throughout the evening, lingered in his mind.

Usually, Katchian was quite outspoken at formal events. However, considering today’s gathering was for belittling the Cavalry along with Duke Diarca, he had been exceptionally quiet.

He wasn’t engaging in oily banter with the young nobles as he usually did, nor was he busy with anything else. Instead, he sat alonethe young Crown Prince.

Ever since the turmoil surrounding Quelochet had unfolded and Baron Durmand had fallen, Katchian had been overtly observant of Yuder. That gaze weighed heavily on him.

‘His expression didn’t seem filled with the wrath that would come from a grudge dating back to the Harvest Festival Could his heightened interest in me be due to my abilities?’

Frankly, he didn’t care what Katchian thought. However, considering that the Star of Nagran and the Sage were close to Katchian, that part unnerved him slightly.

‘Well, I’ll get to ask Kiolle about that soon enough.’

At that moment, someone knocked on the door and entered. It wasn’t Kiolle but Enon.

“Where is Priest Lusan?”

“He’s in the bathroom; he’ll be late.”

Enon spat out the words curtly and began to roughly untie the tie that wrapped around his neck. With a grim face, he spoke.

“It seems we can’t even have one peaceful day. Just when I thought today might be different, suddenly a solo performance appears…”

“…”

“What’s this about developing a resistance after recovering from monster injuries? I don’t recall ever saying that.”

Yuder calmly explained once more, hearing Enon say the same thing that Kishiar had.

“Half of it was a lie. It’s better to say that than to admit I’m unaffected by poisons and drugs other than those from monsters.”

“…”

“However, there was some byproduct from a monster in that drink, so I do feel a little drunk. The Commander said my body temperature has risen.”

Hearing this, Enon pressed his forehead and let out a deep sigh.

“A little drunk? Is that all?”

“That’s it. Nothing else is wrong, as you can see.”

“Why would you drink it in the first place? Weren’t there other ways to deal with it?”

Of course, there were other methods. They would have been much more complex and slower compared to the confusion and fear Yuder could sow among the enemies by drinking it himself.

Seeming to read the answer in Yuder’s face, Enon cursed silently and clicked his tongue.

“Right, this was much more effective and faster. Knowing you would be fine after drinking it anyway, there’s nothing to fear. And since it’s not me who would be shocked by it, I can be at ease, right?”

“I didn’t say all that.”

The only response was a heavy hand slapping against a furrowed forehead.

“Ugh.”

“Yes, you do seem to have a slight fever.”

Enon calmly checked Yuder’s temperature and examined his eyes and hands a few more times. Not finding any other abnormalities, he scowled.

“Don’t eat or drink anything else until we get back.”

“What about water?”

“If you must drink, make it yourself! You know how to make water!”

Enon roughly handed Yuder an empty cup.

“It doesn’t seem like you need divine energy, but just in case, receive some from Lusan when he arrives. And close your eyes and rest.”

“Alright, I understand. But I do have one favor to ask.”

“To find out what was in that drink? That’s obviously something an apothecary should do.”

“No, that’s not the only thing…”

Just then, another knock was heard on the door. This time, it was Lusan, clothed in ornate ceremonial robes, peeking his head inside.

“Yuder, I apologize for being late. How are you feeling?”

“I’m fine.”

“Just give him a bit of divine energy and let’s go.”

At Enon’s indifferent tone, Lusan’s eyes widened as he quickly approached.

“Ah… is that really all? On my way here, the members all secretly asked for an honest update on your condition. It’s good to hear that there’s no problem.”

With visible relief, Lusan infused Yuder’s head with divine energy and began recounting how surprised he had been.

“I was shocked, but when Enon suddenly tried to dash toward you, you wouldn’t believe how my heart almost dropped… That’s partly why I went to the bathroom, to calm down.”

“When did I ever do that? Stop talking nonsense and leave once you’ve given him the divine energy, kid.”

Enon raised his voice to interrupt Lusan’s words. But Yuder had already heard enough to guess what would come next.

“…Is that so?”

“No, I said it’s not.”

“I’m sorry, Enon.”

Muttering what sounded like curses under his breath, Enon wore a fierce expression. Lusan, letting out a small laugh, gradually reduced the amount of divine energy he was channeling to Yuder. “Ah, now that I think about it…” he began.

“When I was about to come in here, a knight who was standing next to the Crown Prince was in front of the next lounge. He looked at me menacingly, so I wondered… Did the Crown Prince secretly send him to check on Yuder’s condition?”

“Is that so? That’s fortunate.”

“Fortunate? What do you mean?”

“Enon, what I want to ask of you is directly related to that.”

“What now!”

Enon shouted, but Yuder had no doubt that both he and Lusan would fulfill his request.

“On your way out, could you leave the door ajar and both of you pretend to leave but come back and wait in the adjacent lounge?”

“…”

“If I want to invite someone who doesn’t even have the courage to open the door, I think I need to do at least that much. Will you do it for me?”

“…Hey!”

A few moments later, Kiolle Diarca carefully opened the door, which had been left just loose enough for anyone to easily open. His eyes filled with extreme anxiety as he whispered in a stifled voice.

“Are you in here? Huh?”

“If you’re going to come in, come in quickly. Just sticking your head in and leaving your body outside looks even stranger.”

Upon hearing Yuder’s voice, Kiolle took a deep breath, quickly closed the door, and entered the lounge. Only when he realized no one else was in the room did he let out a sigh of relief and rub his chest.

“Do you know how hard it was for me to sneak away from the Crown Prince? And to summon me on a day like this, at a time like this…”

“That’s none of my concern.”

It was clear from Kiolle’s face that he found it unbearable not to curse at Yuder’s audacity. However, there was nothing he could do. Yuder gestured toward the sofa opposite him.

“Sit down. There’s no point in wasting time.”

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Aware that there was no benefit to stalling, Kiolle took a seat without resistance. Yuder was the first to speak.

“After we last met, I conducted my own investigation into those healers. I want to first confirm whether the people I found out about are the same ones who frequent that place before we continue our discussion.”

“Alright, go on.”

Yuder recounted the numbers and descriptions of the Awakeners from the Star of Nagran he had personally observed. Listening with the utmost caution, Kiolle clenched his fist and yelled, “That guy!” as soon as Yuder mentioned the actual sage who appeared to be middle-aged.

“He’s the leader of those healers.”

“Is that so? Then the people I described are all associated with those healers?”

“It seems so…”

Kiolle looked at Yuder with eyes filled with suspicion, caution, and a hint of fear. Knowing exactly what he must be thinking, Yuder kindly broke the silence.

“You must be wondering how I found out about their appearances and attire when I haven’t received any information. I assure you, it’s not as frightening as you think.”

Startled, Kiolle tensed up and recoiled.

“I didn’t read your mind to find out, of course. There are methods for these things. Stop wasting time with unnecessary thoughts and answer my questions.”

“…”

“Do you know their names?”

“I… don’t remember. Although I vaguely recall the name the leader mentioned when he introduced himself…”

Kiolle trailed off, shaking his head, but a moment later he seemed to remember and lifted his face.

“Jinen? Chinen?”

“Have you not investigated these healers since we last met?”

“What does remembering their names have to do with investigating them? What’s important is what they’re doing, not their names, which could be aliases for all we know.”

Kiolle snapped back, clearly embarrassed by his own foolishness.

Yuder looked at him disdainfully and moved on.

“So, what peculiar activities have you noticed about them?”

“…None. They’ve come a few more times to treat the Crown Prince since then, but…”

According to Kiolle, the ‘healers’ always visited on scheduled dates, accompanying a chamberlain into the Crown Princes chamber. They then spent about an hour in the dimly lit room, filled with lit candles, mumbling something around the peacefully sleeping Crown Prince. That was the entirety of their ‘treatment.’

After listening to Kiolle’s account, Yuder paused to think before speaking.

“Do you know what they’re saying during those times?”

“I dont. They speak in whispers so soft even the chamberlain cant hear. Unless the Crown Prince tells us, there’s no way to know.”

“You never personally attended to observe?”

“…”

Kiolle’s expression twisted. He seemed to struggle for breath, his face flushed with humiliation and rage, before he finally answered.

“I had initially intended to, but His Highness… forbade me. Then those con artists looked down on me… and had the audacity… to make a disrespectful offer…”

Although it was hard for him to articulate each word without violating some vow, it was not difficult to surmise his meaning.

Initially, he was unable to attend because the Katchian side had refused his presence. Later, although the situation improved slightly, Kiolles pride was wounded and he became furious when the healers themselves offered him the opportunity to join them.

Just hearing the rumors gives me a good idea of how that man is faring in the Crown Prince’s palace.

The common workers of the Bright Palace, where the Crown Prince resided, must have felt as if they were walking on thin ice, as though there were two Crown Princes.

Anyway, it’s clear that Kiolle is not as trusted by Katchian as I thought. I would have done the same if I were Katchian, but still

“You’re a bodyguard and yet you can’t even enter the Crown Prince’s bedroom. Doesn’t that just mean the Crown Prince doesn’t trust you, and that’s why others are treating you that way? If you’re in such an ineffective position, I might have to reconsider our collaboration.”

“What are you talking about? You think I’m the only one who couldn’t go in? All the other knights were the same! Even the servants couldn’t enter at first! You’re still saying this when I’m the one chosen to protect His Highness today? I even verified the identity of those guys for you!”

Indeed, Kiolle was quick to flare up, speaking without reservation at the slightest provocation.

“In the first place, the reason I became His Highness’s bodyguard was because there was no one else who could bridge the gap between the Bright Palace and the outside world! I was the one who first had the privilege of greeting him when he refused even meals and stayed in his bedroom during hard times, before those quack healers arrived!”

“Hmm, I see.”

“Who do you think rallied the demoralized guards and servants? Who comforted His Highness, ensured that meals were delivered consistently, and took care of the broken mirrors and utensils? Who’s keeping an eye on those fraudulent healers? Me, it’s me! Do you think I could do all that without his trust? How dare you, when you know nothing…!”

Noticing how sensitive Kiolle was to the phrase ‘a bodyguard who doesn’t have his lord’s trust,’ Yuder could make even more precise conjectures about Katchian, who had been reclusive since the assassination attempt.

So, before meeting those healers, he stayed in his room, refused meals and contact with anyone, and even broke things. He's more volatile than I thought.

It was not a completely unfamiliar story. In his previous life, Katchian sometimes shut himself in his room after his western reconstruction policy failed. Without any given reason, he postponed state affairs and confined himself for two or three days, ordering that no one be allowed near him. Even Yuder, who executed the Emperor's most secretive orders, had no idea what happened in there.

After he started ruthlessly cutting off the limbs of powerful noble families, including his own backers like the Diarca Duchy, using assassinations and various means, such episodes became less frequent, but it had happened.

The Emperor repeated such behavior until the 'sage' of his previous life appeared, and it got worse after the sage's death.

When the Awakener King Ejain led Nelarn to rapidly grow and openly confront the Empire, when news arrived that natural disasters had led to increasing resentment towards the Emperor, and even after praising Yuder for his accomplishments, then suddenly confining him to house arrest and forbidding palace entry the next day without any particular reason…

And what about the day Yuder was executed?

…He didn't even show up, claiming illness.

Yuder paused his flowing thoughts and exhaled softly.

At any rate, it was fortunate that Katchian La Orr was not the Emperor right now. However, the fact that both the 'sage' of his previous life and the real 'sage' of the Star of Nagran were by his side meant that Yuder couldn't feel entirely at ease.

“Fine, calm down. Since I’ve confirmed that the people I found are indeed those ‘healers,’ I’ll also share a piece of information from my end.”

“…”

Kiolle, who was about to say something more, quickly fell silent.

Yuder searched his memory and slowly opened his mouth.

“Do you remember when you said those people seemed like frauds because they weren’t mages, doctors, or priests?”

“Yes.”

“It seems like you were right. Their power lies elsewhere.”

“What are you talking about?”

“The same power you see before you, in me.”

For a moment, Kiolle swallowed a gasp and choked, breaking into a fit of coughs that reddened his face. Finally regaining his composure, he asked in a voice that was almost a croak.

“Are you saying they’re Awakeners?”

“…”

“That’s impossible. If my father had known, he would never have let them into the Bright Palace in the first place. And what about the people who introduced us to them? Not one of them ever mentioned this! If they’ve been lying, I would have found out and never forgiven them!”

You don’t even know their names, so your forgiveness is meaningless. Yuder thought inwardly, knowing Kiolle couldn’t hear this response, and opened his mouth.

“Power can be hidden, as much as one wishes.”

“I’ve never heard of someone awakening to a healing power! Even among your Cavalry, there’s no one like that! If such a person existed, everyone would already know!”

“Yes, you’re right.”

When Yuder obediently responded, Kiolle looked skeptical.

“So what is it? What are you trying to say?”

“You still don’t get it? What I’m saying is, it doesn’t matter if it’s not a healing power. If you can make people believe in another power, that’s all that matters.”

“…What?”

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Yuder said no more. Kiolle, with a deeply furrowed expression, opened his mouth.

“So, nowhat I mean is, your claim is that these charlatans definitely tricked His Highness into believing they could heal him. But you’re saying they might possess a power similar to healing?”

“No. It doesn’t have to be similar at all; they just have to make him believe it is.”

“What are you talking about? So, is the effect real or not?”

“Maybe you should think about that yourself. There’s hardly anyone in a better position to find out than you.”

“Are you mocking me?”

Mocking? It was utter sincerity.

Kiolle was in an excellent position to best understand everything if he wished. He was a knight in close proximity to Crown Prince Katchian, a trusted son of Duke Diarca, and simultaneously someone who could meet the Star of Nagran without arousing anyone’s suspicion.

That wasnt all. He had already encountered other Awakeners, including Nahan, due to a series of incidents that happened in Hartan, and had directly experienced these matters.

It was quite remarkable that despite such experiences and his current position, he still knew next to nothing.

And the fool, even after hearing all this, looked cluelessly and indignantly at Yuder. Yuder finally decided to give him a small hint.

“Kiolle Da Diarca.”

””

“No answer?”

Yuder leaned deeply against the back of the sofa and refilled his empty cup with water. Kishiar, witnessing the transparent liquid swirling out of nowhere into the cup, was visibly startled. Avoiding eye contact, he shifted uncomfortably and finally responded.

“Why, why?”

“Let me ask one thing. What do you intend to do moving forward with the information you’ve acquired today?”

“What’s it to you?”

“Do I need to remind you of the third clause of our oath, and our previous agreement to cooperate?”

“You’re really devilish, you know!”

An angry Kiolle shouted, his face red with rage.

“If they really are Awakeners if they’re charlatans, then they must be expelled! What else is there to do?”

“Do you think you can do that just by your will alone?”

“What?”

“Do you think the Crown Prince and Duke Diarca will agree to your perspective?”

“What are you saying? My father would, of course,”

“I don’t think so.”

Kiolle blinked several times.

“What”

“Think about it. Was no one aware that these individuals are Awakeners, hiding their true identities?”

””

“Regardless of what their actual identities are, it’s true that the Crown Prince’s condition has improved enough for him to appear today. In such circumstances, who do you think the Crown Prince will trust more? You? Or the healers?”

“But I am! His Highness’s knight and a person from the House of Diarca, personally recommended by my father. Obviously he would trust me more”

As he spoke, the strength in Kiolle’s voice gradually faded.

“Fine. Let’s say that’s the case. Would these so-called healers quietly accept your assertion and step back?”

At that point, Kiolle clenched his mouth shut.

Despite his own assertions to the contrary, he had felt in his bones that the Crown Prince no longer regarded him or the House of Diarca with the same affection as before. Would the prince, who had not stood up even to follow Duke Diarca today, fully trust what Kiolle had to say? And what about his own father?

His father clearly detested Awakeners, openly calling them wretched souls cursed by the gods. Naturally, Kiolle assumed he brought them in without knowing who they were… but what if he did?

Kiolle slightly lifted his head, glancing down at his clenched fist. The man who once drank Quelocheta drink one normally sips cautiouslyas if it were water, looked back at Kiolle with a face no different than before. As if he knew the extent of Kiolle's turmoil, he spoke with abyss-like eyes.

"If you think the mere fact that they are Awakeners is sufficient reason to drive them away, consider why you are sitting here with me."

His tightly clenched fingers twitched. The reason Kiolle sat opposite Yuder was, of course, due to a begrudging oath and a semi-forced alliance. But on a larger scale, he was here because the man before him was stronger, more competent, and could provide useful information.

Yuder Aile was an Awakener. Kiolle neither liked nor trusted Awakeners, but the enormous power the man had shown couldn't be denied. If Yuder called the healers Awakeners, then they certainly were.

Had he not believed that, he wouldn't have tried to recruit him on multiple occasions.

Though reluctant to admit it, Yuder Aile was genuinely competent. A commoner who had risen to the title of Baronwhat more was there to say? Kiolle, who had never felt inferior to his own siblings, had never once felt an advantage when with this man.

The sheer force emanating from his gaze felt eerily similar to the sensation of being in the presence of his angered father.

Even though he'd never felt that way about the healers, if someone that capable and useful was involved… wouldn't both his father and the Crown Prince turn a blind eye?

Had what he initially planned to do truly been for the benefit of his father and the Crown Prince?

The mission that began as a way to help his father and the Crown Prince by getting rid of some deceitful scoundrels suddenly became incredibly confusing.

“It’s truly amusing to hear you talk about driving them away without knowing the extent of their powers or their true intentions in approaching the Crown Prince. I wouldn’t be surprised if you turned up as a corpse under a flowerbed in the palace within a month.”

“Stop speaking ill!”

“I’m not speaking ill. It’s the truth.”

“…”

“Let me clarify: I don’t believe they approached the Crown Prince for good reasons either. But I’m not basing that assumption on mere dislike or irritation like you.”

“So, what should I do?”

Kiolle retorted, unable to contain his irritation any longer.

“If you want to prove they are scammers and expel them, find out why they are scammersbeyond the simple fact that they’re Awakeners.”

“Easy to say. How am I supposed to do that!”

“That’s for the interested party to figure out. It’s not like you’re going to follow my instructions blindly.”

It was an irritating, yet true statement. Kiolle could say nothing; he unclenched his fist and lifted his head.

Standing in front of the Duke of Diarca, he spoke clearly, devoid of any sense of fear.

Was there really something Yuder fears or finds difficult?

'…'

The face that came to mind at that moment was of a man dancing with Duke Peletta under the light of the chandelier. The man, who danced shamelessly and naturally as if unaware of the absurdity he was committing, was now wearing an entirely different expression as he looked at Duke Peletta.

His face was as stoic as ever, yet far more cautious and gentle.

Behind an expression so different that one might believe it belonged to another person, there seemed to be a glimpse of an inexplicable emotion.

As if it was the kind of emotion you would only see from someone with whom you have a truly deep relationship That kind of…

'Did that brat say he has a different second gender from that of Duke Peletta?'

Voices discussing this matter, which he hadn't even considered before, now echoed repeatedly in his mind.

Kiolle seemed to have said all he had to say and was quietly staring at Yuders face as he drank water. Kiolle shook his head irritably. His head was throbbing, and he wanted to take some medicine.

But before that, there was something he needed to say.

"If I find out more about those healers, are you interested in exchanging information again?"

“Well, that depends on what you find out. I really can’t say today since you werent much help.”

“Anyway, you’re saying you’re open to the idea!”

“Lets say thats the case.”

“Then meet me again next time. I’ve become interested in finding out more about those guys myself.”

Illustration of Kishiar and Yuder when they were dancing in the Palace

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Chapter 513

“Come back next time, then. I’ve become interested in learning more about them as well.”

Yuder broke the silence first, yet anxiously observed Kiolle’s face as he stared back at him. Just before Kiolle’s limited patience ran out, Yuder leisurely nodded, signaling his acceptance.

“Alright. But Kiolle.”

“What!”

“If you’re going to investigate them, just be upfront about it. You’re not good at hiding things.”

“What kind of nonsense are you talking about?”

“I’m giving you advice as a gesture of goodwill, considering the warning you gave me at ‘Da Fiel’ and our renewed alliance.”

Even without his advice, the outcome would likely have been the same. Nevertheless, it was helpful. Kiolle, however, couldn’t perceive Yuder’s advice as anything but condescending, and his expression tightened noticeably.

Kiolle had already been on edge while watching Yuder confront Baron Durmand and appear before his father. He had been so anxious that he couldn’t even look directly at him. Even now, a lingering, uncomfortable sensation filled a corner of his heart, as if he had betrayed his own father.

“Are you mocking me?”

“If I wanted to mock you, I would’ve just laughed.”

“…”

“Remember that if you really plan to investigate.”

Instead of replying, Kiolle grimaced as if he was about to curse. He took several deep breaths before abruptly standing up. Just before he exited without looking back, Yuder called him again.

“Wait a moment.”

“Why now!”

“Your knight’s emblem fell off.”

It seemed Kiolle had stood up so abruptly that the emblem of the Knights of the Bright Palace, which had been secured between his uniform’s cape and shoulder, fell and rolled onto the floor. The fastener had flown off, leaving only the pin rattling around. Yuder easily picked it up.

The emblem, engraved with a beautiful, luminous tree, was made of a material tinged with the red color that symbolized the Crown Prince.

“Give it here!”

Kiolle quickly walked back with a flushed face and snatched it. For a moment, Yuder felt a slight sting inside his glove. When he looked down, he saw a small red stain on the white fabric. Apparently, the pin had scratched through the glove and touched his skin.

“…”

“Wait. That wasn’t my fault, I…”

Kiolle hastily spoke upon seeing Yuder’s silence, clearly worried about facing retribution. Though the white gloves made the stain

slightly noticeable, it was hardly more than a pinprick and not painful, so Yuder merely shook his head.

“Its fine. Go.”

“But why did you even bother to pick it up when I didn’t ask you to…!”

“Just go.”

Kiolle, who was about to offer yet another excuse that wasn’t really an excuse, finally retreated when Yuder frowned. How they would meet next time was not decided, but Yuder could always summon Kiolle if needed.

‘I’m only dealing with one guy, but in some ways, it’s more draining than facing both Duke Diarca and Baron Durmand.’

Yuder sighed and rose from his seat. He planned to join up with Enon and Lusan in the adjoining waiting room and make his way back when the time was right.

However, just as he was straightening his knees to stand, an unexpected bout of dizziness hit him, causing his vision to momentarily blur.

‘…What’s this?’

Yuder braced himself against the back of the sofa, bowing his head. After shaking his head and taking several deep breaths, the dizziness soon dissipated. Though he didn’t experience a headache, his mind felt inexplicably suffocated.

‘Maybe it’s because I’m still a little drunk.’

Yuder summoned water to drink once again. A sense of relief washed over him.

He opened the door and headed for the adjacent waiting room. As soon as he knocked, Lusan and Enon, who were glancing at him in unison, hurriedly approached.

“Did you finish your talk with him? Everything’s alright, I hope?”

“Yes.”

“Good to hear.”

Yuder had told Lusan and Enon that he met with Kiole due to a personal task. He hadn’t disclosed what the task entailed, but Enon seemed to have an inkling, judging by his expression.

Unlike Lusan, Enon scanned Yuder with a piercing gaze. He soon noticed the glove and widened his eyes.

“You said everything was fine. What’s this?”

“Ah, this is…”

Before Yuder could explain, Enon grabbed his hand. Lusan gasped upon seeing the small bloodstain on the glove.

“My god, that’s blood!”

Faced with the scrutiny of both the pharmacist and the Priest, Yuder felt as though he had committed some great sin. He averted their eyes, clenched his fist, and hid the wound.

“Ah… it’s not a big deal. Just a minor mishap.”

He explained that he had been slightly grazed by the sharp pin on the back of an emblem that Kiole had dropped. Enon’s expression remained stern.

“If that’s the case, why hide it? You should’ve asked for treatment immediately!”

“It’s not painful. There’s no need for that.”

“Isn’t a paper-cut still a cut? When will you ever get treated if you’re like this? Just remember you can’t get treated after you’re dead!”

“Sir Enon is right,” Lusan added. “We are here specifically to handle such matters. Even a small wound can fester. Especially considering you’ve been drinking…”

“Sit down!”

Yuder finally relented after apologizing profusely. He removed his glove and allowed himself to be treated. Lusan poured a waterfall of divine energy into the minor wound, which soon vanished without a trace.

“…Thank you.”

“Any other issues?”

Both looked like they’d give him an even harder time if anything else came up later. Yuder hesitated for a moment before mentioning the slight dizziness he had felt earlier.

“I felt a bit dizzy when I stood up, but it went away quickly. I think it might be due to the alcohol.”

“See, this is why we have to ask multiple questions. Some people just don’t speak up right away, even if it’s inconvenient.”

“Absolutely.”

“…So we’re done now, right?”

Exhaling a sigh, Yuder watched as Enon surveyed him a few more times before reluctantly nodding.

“Yes.”

Yuder blinked his still-cloudy eyes and put his glove back on. Just as he was about to turn to leave the room, a sudden wave of unsteadiness hit him, and he had to brace himself against the wall.

Thud. The sensation of his skin hitting the solid wall felt muted.

“Sir Yuder!”

Lusan’s voice sounded oddly distant. It took him a few seconds to realize that it was Enon who was supporting him by the arm.

Yuder shook his head to clear it. The dizziness, and the subsequent recovery, mirrored what had happened earlier, but this episode lasted a bit longer.

“Lift your head a bit.”

Yuder realized that Enon’s hand, pressing against his forehead, felt cooler than before. And he also realized that Enon’s expression had turned decidedly more fierce.

“You’re feverish.”

“Really?”

Lusan looked startled and retorted.

“This guy, his complexion hasn’t changed, but he’s incredibly hot.”

“Could it be that the poison from earlier is just now taking effect?”

“No, that’s not it.”

Yuder shook his head and brushed off Enon’s hand. He felt his heart beating faster than before. A wave of heat surged from his

fingertips to his toes, and the insides of his eyes felt unbearably hot.

At first, he couldn't understand it, but as all these sensations came together, a forgotten memory quickly resurfaced. Yuder knew what this floating sensation under his feet was.

This was… a distinct sense of intoxication.

"It's just… drunkenness."

"What are you talking about? You weren't like this earlier."

"I don't know why it's intensified so suddenly… but it's definitely not sickness. I'm drunk. I've… experienced it before."

Yuder shrugged off Enon. His own face reflected in a distant ornate mirror seemed to waver faintly. His complexion was as pale as it had been before, which had also been the case in his previous life when he was drunk. So it was certain. This was simply drunkenness.

"This isn't something to make a fuss about. I'll be fine after a short rest; you go on ahead."

"What?"

"Go."

The moment he spat out the word, a gust of wind blew from beneath his feet. Yuder stepped back and sat on the sofa. He buried his face in his hands and took several deep breaths. The dizziness slowly began to subside. He felt a bit cold, yet not cold at the same time.

"Enon, sir…"

"Kid, you go ahead. And then…"

The conversation between Lusan and Enon faded in and out, and the door opened and closed. After Lusan had left, Enon who remained took a deep breath and slowly approached Yuder.

When he was about a few steps away, Yuder lifted his head and frowned. At this, Enon stopped in his tracks, crossing his arms as if he would not come any closer.

“Stop being so defensive, will you?”

“…”

“If you’re going to get drunk, at least do it gracefully.”

“Enon, just go.”

“I will. But before I do, cover yourself with this.”

Enon threw something. It was something heavy that fell over his headit was the outer garment of his formal attire.

“It’s suffocating. Take it with you.”

“It’s supposed to be suffocating; that’s why I gave it to you!”

Enon sighed and shook his head. Then, faint but disruptive footsteps were heard not far away. Casting a brief glance in that direction, Enon muttered under his breath.

“…They’re here. I’m going. Know that you’ll get scolded later.”

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Chapter 514

“What is coming?” Yuder’s mind belatedly dissected the words, trying to make sense of them. His vision, shrouded by the robe of his formal attire, became blurred. Lost in a familiar darkness, Yuder stopped thinking altogether and simply stared into that silent black void.

His head felt duller than usual. Sounds were muffled, and the world seemed to move slowly. He was well-acquainted with this kind of darkness; it was mostly during the nights that he savored the sensation of being drunk, always alone.

Back then, he would always be in the Commanders room. When consumed by thoughts he couldn’t shake off on his own, he would drink Quelochet that he’d stashed in a dusty corner of the Commander’s room located at the top of the old barracks of the Cavalry.

He couldn’t remember who had given it to him, but he was certain it was during a party. It was right after an event celebrating their perfect victory against large monsters in the northeast.

Emperor Katchian had bestowed a reward upon him, while nobles murmured behind himsuspiciously discussing his inhuman strength and the dangers of being an Awakener. And yet, it was the most mundane setting for Yudrain Aile, the Commander of the Cavalry unit, where several people would furtively seek his attention, hoping to ask something of him.

Someone raised a toast to the great Commander Yudrain Aile. He was no stranger to poison drinks served with ill intent, but since he had never fallen for it before, he took the glass without worry.

“When will they stop this foolishness?” he remembered thinking. But this time was different.

The moment he drank, his stomach burned and dizziness overwhelmed him. Sensing his heart rate accelerate, he frowned, prompting concerned voices to rise around him. Of course, most of those voices were disingenuous, exaggeratedly loud to maintain an appearance.

“Is the day finally here? The day this inhuman monster, this lowborn, falls?”

“Could I be the first to witness such an extraordinary and interesting spectacle?”

Behind these easily-read expressions, the relaxed face of Emperor Katchian was visible, seated comfortably on his golden throne. He seemed indifferent to the state of his favored subordinate, sipping his own drink.

Gazing beyond a beautifully crafted glass, Yuder’s eyes met the emperor’sturbid and red.

In that moment, when his knees nearly gave out as if looking through a shattered mirror, a phrase brushed Yuder’s mind.

“You’ll always have those who look down on you. But remember, a Commander has no need to lower himself.”

To others, and to himself.

Strength returned to Yuder’s legs. He neither staggered nor fell.

Firmly planting his feet on the ground, he slowly looked around, as if nothing had changed. Those who met his gaze hastily looked away. The person who handed him the drink had long since paled.

Though his head was still dull and his blood still rushed quickly,

Nothing had changed.

Yudrain Aile did not falter before those who wished for his downfall. With an unchanged complexion, he drank more, sending a shiver of terror through those present. Nobody dared stop him as he left the party, bottle in hand.

Back in the Commanders room, Yuder tried to recall the taste of the Quelochet he had drunk. But he couldn't remember it, perhaps because he would get drunk right away. All he could summon was the distinct smell of dust from that very room.

Yuder had never shown anyone the way he got drunk. All he did was sit in a chair, feeling his body temperature slowly rise and then fall again, while staring at the night sky beyond the window.

And when he grew bored, he would count the passage of time with dimmed eyes, for no particular reason, until his inebriation faded.

Until his body temperature returned to normal and sounds became audible again, until he could no longer revel in thoughtless silence. On and on it went.

He had decided it would be so…

"…Suddenly feeling tipsy, aren't we?"

A voice suddenly pierced his ears. The muffled noises that had surrounded him disappeared, replaced by a sudden clarity of voice. Yuder opened his heavy eyes.

Though his head and senses remained dull, the presence of the person before him felt incredibly vivid. His body sensed the other's presence before his ears did.

Where he was standing, what he was looking at, how he approached, how he was extending his hand… Everything felt palpably connected by some invisible force.

Even though his vision was obstructed by a ceremonial robe, his body, highly alert, didn't budge an inch before the reaching hand. The sporadic tension that had shielded him from the surroundings now lay still, killing his ragged breaths.

And finally, the hand, imbued with a chilly scent, slowly lifted the flap of the ceremonial robe that had covered Yuder's face.

When the sun is at its zenith, people easily forget that night had existed just a few hours ago.

The moment Yuder locked eyes with Kishiar La Orr, he momentarily forgot all the memories that had surfaced from the darkness that had covered his face.

"…"

"Yuder Aile, can you hear me?"

To meet Yuder's gaze, Kishiar had knelt down. Yuder realized the familiarity of the scene.

'When was it?'

He cautiously met Kishiar's gaze; that face, though gentle, failed to fully suppress the fiery emotion within its eyes.

'When…'

"Yuder."

White fingertips touched Yuder's cheek. In that moment, Yuder realized what he had been trying to remember.

It was the moment he had manifested his second gender.

“…Commander.”

His lips parted, slightly damp. Kishiar seemed to instantly recognize who Yuder was referring to, nodding his head.

“Good, you can hear my voice.”

“When…did you arrive? Why…”

“That’s not important.”

Kishiar turned his head slightly to better lock eyes with Yuder, his voice soft but firm.

“May I remove your gloves? I heard you were injured.”

“That has…healed, but…”

“I know. There’s something I want to check. It’ll only take a moment.”

“…”

“Is that alright?”

Yuder flinched as the hand pulling at his fingertips made its move, yet offered no resistance. Two gloves were removed with a tingling sensation; he felt Kishiar pass them to someone behind him, but he let it be.

“If something turns up, we’ll take care of it immediately.”

“Is it… serious? Had he… used too much power? Is he alright, Commander?”

“Hes fine. The priest and apothecary said so, so we will need to be careful from now on.”

“I’m relieved, but still…”

“…”

“Understood. Then…”

A brief exchange later, the door closed again. Now, only the two of them remained in the lounge.

When Kishiar attempted to kneel before him again, Yuder extended his hand, clenching and unclenching his fist. He wanted to speak, but his mouth felt too heavy to open. He merely lowered his head slightly, but the perceptive man quickly caught on to Yuder’s intentions.

“Do you not like it when I sit like this?”

””

“I understand.”

Soon after, Yuder felt the seat next to him sink as a palpable weight settled. A comforting warmth enveloped him, much like a quilt.

He hadn’t noticed until then, but someone had turned off all the lights in the lounge. The room was eerily silent and dim. A window, not too far away, was slightly ajar, letting in a night breeze that tickled his face.

Yuder let the silence wash over him, staring into space as if by habit. As he slowly cycled through this, the tension drained from his body and he relaxed completely.

It was then that he heard the voice again.

“What are you thinking about right now, my assistant?”

Yuder’s eyes blinked slowly. The smiling, pale face before him seemed oddly unfamiliar. The excessive beauty of the visage made it appear half-unreal, like something from a dream or fantasy.

“Counting.”

“Counting what?”

“Counting the passing moments.”

“Counting the passage of time was also a game I often played long ago.”

””

“In my case, it was because lying in bed got tedious. Do you feel the same?”

Is it tedious? Yuder asked himself, then shook his head.

“It’s not tedious.”

“Do you, in fact, enjoy spending time like this?”

He didn’t respond, but the other man didn’t seem to mind.

“Hmm. That’s quite interesting, a fact I’ve learned for the first time.”

The man chuckled softly. Amidst everything feeling slow and dull, that laughter touched something deep within Yuder, making his chest tingle.

Perhaps because of that, Yuder suddenly found himself speaking more openly than he had intended.

“I’ve always counted like this, even before.”

For a moment, there was a brief silence beside him, then a slightly lower voice spoke.

“Even before, you say?”

””

“Have you often counted time while as intoxicated as tonight?”

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Chapter 515

It was a difficult question to answer. How many times would be considered many, and how many times would suffice for the answer to be ‘few’? After a moment of silence, Yuder gave the best answer he could muster with his clouded mind.

“I don’t know.”

“I see…”

Kishiar didn’t say anything more.

The room once again fell into a heavy quietude. As Yuder took a deep breath and opened his eyes, he felt a gentle touch on his cheek. A familiar scent tickled his nose, and simultaneously, his head felt even hazier. The tension drained from his previously rigid body.

It was a sensation similar to the tipsiness he had been experiencing, yet somehow different.

What was different? His slow-moving thoughts eventually came to a standstill. He didn’t feel like pondering over something so taxing while inebriated. Instead, Yuder fixed his gaze on the man’s face that had caught his attention, as well as the window beyond him.

Before he knew it, the heat that had risen noticeably in his body yearned for the cool breeze blowing in through the window crack.

Just as he moved to catch a little more of the breeze, Kishiar finally turned his head toward him.

“Is it hot?”

“Yes.”

“If you want to catch some air, that direction would be better. There’s a door leading to the balcony.”

Kishiar pointed in a direction obscured by furniture and pillars. Without a word, Yuder stood and walked in that direction. Though slightly dizzy, walking wasn’t an issue. His feet, however, felt as if they were floating above the ground.

“Be careful.”

The man who naturally followed beside him gently steered Yuder’s shoulder, subtly adjusting his direction a couple of times. Although he wanted to say it wasn’t necessary, his lips felt heavy again, and he simply exhaled.

Kishiar was right. Pushing open a door that was so adorned with intricate artwork it was hard to tell if it was a door or a wall, Yuder discovered a hidden balcony.

The balcony, furnished with an exceptionally plush long chair and low table, looked as though it was designed to be a rendezvous point for lovers. However, the view below was too splendid to be wasted on such trysts.

The expansive garden extending from the palace, the numerous grand sculptures forming fountains, and an artificial canal traversing them were softly illuminated by decorative lights. The faint sound of people talking in the distance mixed with music, adding another layer to the picturesque scene.

Yuder leaned against the railing and deeply inhaled the breeze that cooled his heat.

“One reason Cantameria Palace is famous is for this view. From here, you can see all the most beautiful parts of the garden at once. In the summer, you can even watch people sailing little boats on the canal.”

Yuder wasn’t particularly imaginative, but while listening to Kishiar’s melodic voice right next to him, he almost felt like he could see the scene in his mind’s eye.

Despite being overly accustomed to palace parties, this was a novel experience for him.

“Rather than counting the passing time, it’s more enjoyable to watch scenes like this.”

Indeed, that was true. Staring into the darkness or merely gazing at the sky outside the window offered far less to see.

And even more colorful and varied than this beautiful scenery were the countless emotions reflected in the eyes of the man standing beside him.

Suddenly turning his head to meet those eyes, Yuder realized a bit later than usual that he couldn’t look away.

And he also realized that the eyes staring back at him looked deeper than usual, tinged with an indescribable pain.

“Why?”

The moment he wanted to know the reason behind that gaze, his heavy lips parted.

“Why do you look at me that way?”

“If you want to find the answer to an unprovable question, you must first begin to trust, even under unbelievable conditions.”

The reply did not directly answer Yuder’s question.

“For me, it’s about trusting all the information given to me without doubt, and finding the point where all of it could become the truth. It’s

a terribly difficult and challenging task, but perhaps the answer I seek lies there.”

The voice continued evenly, revealing no particular emotion.

“I thought I was doing well up to that point… but as I come to know more and more, I realize it’s becoming even harder for precisely that reason.”

Due to his dulled senses, Yuder couldn’t fully comprehend even half of what was said.

“I… I don’t quite understand what you’re saying.”

“…”

Red eyes disappeared between golden eyelashes.

A moment later, he reached out and pulled Yuder into a tight embrace. It was the strongest force he had exerted thus far. Breathing became momentarily difficult, but Yuder didn’t push him away. There was no reply, but somehow, it felt alright just like this.

“Shall we dance?”

Kishiar spoke again around the time the distant music ended and the next song began.

“Suddenly, what…?”

“Is there any reason not to dance when there’s music and a companion who has stolen my heart? Dancing is the best when one is intoxicated.”

Strangely, Kishiar seemed more intoxicated than Yuder, who was likely the one who had been drinking. But then again, Kishiar had always been unpredictable. Before they knew it, their hands were clasped in a familiar manner.

It was not a perfect pose like in the ballroom. The movements were erratic, mostly consisting of slow spins with arms around each other's waists. It was laughable to call it dancing, but, oddly enough, the chaotic dance wasn't so bad.

"You just smiled."

After almost tripping over each other's feet and barely recovering by almost collapsing onto a chair, Kishiar said so.

"I don't know… "

"You smiled, I swear on my name."

The man holding Yuder in his arms replied with assertive certainty. Yuder looked at him blankly, then furrowed his brow.

"Don't swear on your name for something so strange."

"It's not strange. Seeing that you're now capable of smiling, I think it's important enough to swear on."

After saying this, Kishiar gently kissed the top of Yuder's head.

"Do you remember? The day we first went on a vacation together."

The words flowed out casually, but Yuder instinctively felt they carried immense significance.

"I felt overwhelmed by some enormous emotion that I couldn't fully understand. Tears came to my eyes; it was that intense. At the time, I didn't know what it was…"

The man who had momentarily paused looked into Yuder's eyes, which were fixed on his face, and smiled bitterly.

"…After experiencing it once more just now, I think I understand."

That enormous, overwhelming feeling that painfully stabbed at the heart.

That agony.

“It wasn’t just mine… Yours was undoubtedly mixed in there too.”

It was an assertion that needed no reply.

Yuder felt a faint dizziness surging in his head.

A distant knock sounded at the door. Kishiar, holding Yuder in his arms as if he were half-asleep, returned to the inner part of the balcony. After laying him on the sofa and covering him with a red cloth, Kishiar opened the door. Kanna Wand appeared with a tense expression on her face, clutching the gloves she had taken off Yuder.

“Commander.”

“Was there a harvest?”

“Yes. But Yuder is…”

Kanna’s eyes briefly darted to behind Kishiar’s back. Her expression changed to one of sorrow upon confirming Yuder’s reclined figure. Kishiar added a word for her sake.

“He seems fine. From what I’ve seen so far, he’s not showing any symptoms more severe than earlier.”

Of course, by “not more severe than earlier,” Kishiar meant not worse than when he first found him. He didn’t bother mentioning that Yuder’s condition was somewhat removed from what one would generally consider ‘intoxication.’

“Ah That’s a relief. Truly.”

Relieved, Kanna immediately resumed her clear-headed and determined expression.

“The information gleaned from the gloves, and what I’ve heard from Enon the pharmacist, and Priest Lusan, all match. Yuder picked up a knight’s emblem dropped by the individual he met here and was injured by a sharp part of it while the individual was trying to retrieve it. Everything else, including the healing process, is exactly as you know.”

“What about the part where it was an accident?”

“It’s difficult to read the exact circumstances, but it seems that Yuder indeed believed it was accidental. No information suggesting he was exerting force in a fight or argument with the individual was detected.”

“I see. Then it is as expected.”

“As expected, you say”

Kanna trailed off, her expression asking for further clarification.

Kishiar opened his mouth slowly, his face devoid of any smile.

“You do know that the individual Yuder met was the Crown Prince’s escort knight, don’t you?”

“Yes.”

“The emblems of the Imperial Guard Knights are usually made in a color that represents their master, and it’s customary to pass them on to the successor, unless the knight leaves the post in disgrace. Therefore, they are made from materials that are highly durable and long-lasting.”

And the color that represents the Crown Prince is red.

Kanna blinked for a moment, not fully grasping the implication. A beautiful yet icy smile surfaced on Kishiars lips.

“Can you guess what might be the most appropriate material for such a token?”

For a moment, Kanna’s eyes widened as if she had guessed something.

“You can’t mean”

“Yes. Its a byproduct from a monster.”

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Chapter 516

Not all the Imperial Guards in the Imperial Palace used badges made from monster by-products. However, it was a fact that monster by-products were considered some of the most durable materials.

Moreover, when it came to finding a material imbued with the symbolic red color of the Crown Prince, this was far superior to any gemstone or metal. Teeth and bones that emerged from monsters often had a red hue, and they could symbolize the glory of the First Crown Prince of the Orr Empire, Aclan La Orr, who was famous as an exceptional monster hunter under the title of ‘Red Brilliance.’

Considering Yuder Aile’s sole weakness, it would be more surprising to guess that the badge wasn’t made from monster by-products.

Yuder probably didn’t pay much attention to what the emblem was made of. Kiolle Da Diarca, who supplied the emblem, also likely didn’t know; considering the burden of the oath and his usual demeanor, the chance that Kiolle had made an informed decision was exceedingly low.

However, it wasn’t surprising that Yuder experienced a sensitive reaction from an object made of monster by-products while under the influence of Quelochet, a substance as polar opposite to his nature.

Even the tiniest wound could be the final straw that leads to death if the body it inflicted was already in a precarious state, like a cup filled to the brim with water.

How would it be for someone who had just barely recovered from injuries? Fever, drowsiness, and dimming of sight and hearing are common signs of intoxication, but they are also symptoms commonly experienced by those weakly poisoned.

Yuder himself had merely called it intoxication, but his instinct thought otherwise. The lounge was still a mess from the objects scattered about due to the force exerted to block out anyone from approaching him.

Kishiar thought of Yuder, who was huddled in a dark corner of the lounge, his imperial robes thrown over him like a cloak. It was a temporary measure Enon had taken to calm him down, cloaking his eyes to forcibly soothe the beast within. However, the chill Kishiar felt when he faced Yuder in that moment was like a blade slicing through him.

And what about the moment when Yuder, so guarded against the outside world, leaned his head against Kishiar's hand without any resistance?

When the question Kishiar had thrown out to lighten the atmosphere and gauge his condition was returned, Kishiar La Orr felt an indescribable upheaval of enormous emotions within him.

Yuder Aile, now unusually lucid, displayed an expression that seemed as worn and weathered as the surface of a long-eroded stone. His eyes, empty of anything, paradoxically let one feel the fierce tempests he must have faced.

The moment Kishiar wanted to know about that tempest, and that as-yet-unknown answer, unfamiliar sensations began to stir and spread within his chest. The alien feeling of something new inserting itself among his own contained emotions felt eerily similar to the sensations they had first experienced when they became intimate.

The only difference was that if the new sensation they had felt back then was a mix of pain, joy, and ecstasy, this time it was a seemingly calm but unfathomable darkness, under which lay hidden a weighty sorrow.

"…So, what should we do now, Commander?"

Kishiar paused his thoughts at Kanna's question and looked up.

Sending Yuder back first and then ending the party would be easy. But doing so would erase the advantages Yuder Aile had gained by drinking Quelochet. There was no intention of ruining the sacrifices and efforts he had made to successfully conclude the day.

"So there's only one thing left."

The best course of action for his Cavalry was to keep his condition and weaknesses a secret, ensuring the party ended successfully without anyone knowing the situation.

Kishiar calmly assessed the matters that would follow the party and spoke.

"How are things in the hall?"

"So far, not bad. Everyone believes Yuder is resting without any issues. After you came over, the Crown Prince and the other nobles seemed a bit suspicious, but"

"Fine. Then proceed with the party as planned. I will return to the hall shortly. Keep an eye on Yuder for a moment."

"Are you sure? What if Yuder's condition changes again like before"

"That won't happen, don't worry."

From the moment Kishiar came into contact with Yuder, his condition had rapidly stabilized. Kishiar was confident that Yuder wouldn't drastically deteriorate even if he left, especially since Yuder had even recovered enough to dance.

"Inform the others that I had to meet a guest separately and can't return immediately. If someone comes to visit following my

instructions, let only that person in.”

Kishiar intended to attribute this ‘guest’ to the Empress, who had vacated her seat. It wouldn’t be suspicious for the Empress to secretly send someone to inquire about today’s top performer. She would also readily cooperate once she heard the situation, allowing for quick resolution. It would be easier to divert attention if the Empress, rather than the Emperor, was involved.

Kishiar mentally reviewed the tasks and contacts he needed to make, then straightened his clothes. He had covered Yuder with the red cloth he had been wearing around his shoulders and waist, leaving him somewhat underdressed, but he had no intention of correcting that.

Before leaving the lounge, Kishiar took one last glance back. The quiet figure lying there seemed peaceful, which only weighed heavier on his heart.

He closed his eyes and recalled the brief smile Yuder Aile had shown.

The small breath that had escaped when he hurriedly caught him from tripping; the awkward yet sincere smile that was rare at his age.

That was reason enough to move his reluctant feet.

When he came to his senses, he was told the party had ended.

That alone was bewildering enough, but what startled Yuder more was the fact that the Empress’s chief maid was right in front of him.

“I’m glad you’ve awakened safely, Baron Aile.”

She introduced herself as Countess Algorita Barnez. The story of how this came to be was first told by Kanna, who had been tending

to him, but he couldn’t help but feel strangely about it.

“When Her Majesty the Empress hears that you have regained consciousness, she will be truly delighted.”

Algorita appeared to be exceptionally generous, a rare sight in the palace. She didn’t seem displeased even after mentioning that the Empress had sent her here due to Kishiar’s request, and although she seemed talkative, she didn’t show excessive curiosity towards Yuder.

She smiled like a simple country wife, yet the way she maintained her composure suggested she fit perfectly as a close aide to the Empress, someone who would grow medicinal herbs herself and bring them all the way to the Sun Palace.

Judging by the decent expression on Kanna, who stood beside her, it seemed she too had a rather favorable impression of her.

“…Thank you. Please also convey my deepest gratitude to Her Majesty the Empress.”

“Of course. There’s nothing better than onion soup after drinking poor-quality alcohol. Make sure to have some.”

She answered cheerfully, but instead of getting up to leave, she unexpectedly addressed Yuder with additional words.

“By the way, Baron Aile. Do you have any plans to visit the Dawn Palace soon?”

“Excuse me?”

“Although I came here at the request of His Grace, Duke Peletta, the truth is that Her Majesty the Empress has taken an interest in you, Baron Aile. She asked me to inquire about your willingness to visit, should you wake up safely.”

Upon Yuder blinking his eyes, she flashed a somewhat secretive yet bitter smile.

“It seems many questions have arisen since your last visit to the Sun Palace… but Her Majesty said it’s perfectly fine to decline if you’re too burdened by the many Cavalry projects. So feel free to answer.”

Declining wasn’t on his mind at all. This was nothing but a confirmation of Kishiar’s plan to first stimulate the Empress’s side instead of Emperor Keilusa, who had strongly rejected any attempts at treatment.

However, Yuder was momentarily displeased, sensing the Empress’s thoughts in her words that he could decline the invitation even as she made it.

“I’m fine with it. If Her Majesty the Empress calls for me, I can go at any time. Please relay that for future reference.”

Upon hearing the quiet yet prompt acceptance, Algorita’s expression brightened. She then said she would contact the Cavalry later and exited the lounge.

The next person he made eye contact with was Kanna.

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Chapter 517

Until now, whenever Kanna caught eyes with Yuder, she'd strangely hesitate and either back away or avoid him altogether. This time was different. Her gaze, filled with indescribable emotions, briefly met Yuder's before fading away with a sigh that seemed to sink into the earth.

Yuder decided to break the silence for her sake.

"Kanna, can you tell me what exactly happened after I got drunk?"

He had woken up to Kanna's news that the party was over, and that Kishiar had sent the Empress's chief maid for some reason. However, he hadn't heard any further details.

While it was good that the party had ended, he was deeply curious to know if it had concluded in a joyful atmosphere.

"After Commander Kishiar checked on you and left, there were no issues. Everyone had fun. People were fascinated when they heard that you and I would be meeting with the Empress's entourage and would stay at the party a little longer. Most have returned to the Cavalry by now."

Kanna had to stay by Yuder's side in Kishiar's absence. To facilitate this, the Empress had decided to feign interest not only in Yuder but also in Kanna.

Given Kanna Wand's contributions in investigating the huge mana stone vein buried in the Great Sarain Forest, nobody questioned this. She had even received an award next to Ever for her work.

Nobody dared to intrude into their private room, and they could pass the time peacefully until Yuder's condition improved. The party had concluded without incident, a success by all measures.

"And what about the Crown Prince and the other nobles?"

"It's hard to say for certain… but no one openly inquired about you."

"That's good."

Yuder felt a sense of relief. It was clear that Kishiar had effectively filled his absence and wrapped up the party well. He had been secretly anxious, wondering if he had somehow disrupted the ongoing smooth proceedings. With a lighter heart, he sighed, his aching head clearing.

'I wonder why I got so seriously drunk out of the blue… I should ask Kishiar about that part when I meet him.'

He had been too intoxicated to think properly when his sudden drunkness had hit. Even now, he could only vaguely recall what had happened then. But he distinctly remembered that Kishiar had visited and then left.

Kishiar's characteristic musky scent still lingered faintly in the room, steadying his mind.

"Thanks for letting me know. And… I'm sorry."

He had merely lain there, but Kanna had missed out on the party because of him. Lately, she had been behaving strangely, and he couldn't rule out that she felt even more uncomfortable than she looked.

As he apologized, Kanna's expression changed. Her eyes and ears reddened, and her tightly closed lips trembled slightly. Yuder

could tell she was still suppressing her emotions.

“Don’t apologize.”

“But you didn’t get to enjoy the party because of me.”

“I wasn’t enjoying it from the start. Being here is far better than dodging people who were unnecessarily talking to me just to extract some information about the mana stone vein.”

“Someone did that to you? Who?”

Yuder was incredulous that any noble would dare to pull such a stunt on one of the Deputy Commanders of the Cavalry. At that, Kanna frowned for the first time and chuckled softly.

“Will you go beat them up again if you know who they are? Forget it. I didn’t say it for that reason.”

“I have more than a hundred ways to deal with it without getting caught. Just give me a description if you don’t know their name.”

“I said forget it.”

Kanna, who had sternly shaken her head, averted her gaze slightly and mumbled after a moment.

“It’s not that I don’t want to; it’s just that I’ve already taken care of those annoying people with my own power. There’s no need for you to get involved.”

“…”

When Kanna first joined the Cavalry, she had been afraid to even visit the imperial palace for fear of running into her father. Seeing Yuder’s expression, Kanna realized anew that her father was no longer around, and her face brightened slightly more than before.

“Don’t worry. I’ve controlled my powers well enough not to get caught. At most, the Cavalry will just be a bit more cautious, thinking they know more petty details than they actually do. That’s not so bad, is it?”

“…Fine. Well done.”

In the end, that was all he could say.

What should he say next? He wanted to ask why Kanna was avoiding him, but he hesitated as he couldn’t even guess the reason.

He used to speak without such concerns, but it seemed he had changed in that regard.

“Yuder.”

As if sensing his hesitation, Kanna spoke up. A similar sense of hesitancy briefly flickered across her now more relaxed face.

“You knew I’ve been avoiding you a bit lately, right?”

“Yes.”

A complex array of emotions flashed across Kanna’s face, which was slightly biting her lip.

“It’s not that I wanted to avoid you. I just didn’t know what to say when I saw you… I thought it would get better with time, but it hasn’t… Anyway, it’s not your fault. There’s no serious issue. I was planning on saying this first today, but given the circumstances, I’m saying it now.”

While she said it wasn’t his fault, the idea of avoiding someone because you don’t know what to say to them was puzzling.

“I don’t understand why you have to avoid me if it’s not my fault. You don’t have to hold back, just tell me honestly.”

“It’s really not your fault.”

“If you think cursing me out or using weapons would help, go ahead.”

“Why are you so extreme? I have no reason to do that to you! Have you forgotten that I’ve always been on your side, no matter what?”

Kanna asked incredulously. A mixture of an unwilling smile and a sigh creased her scrunched eyes. “I really didn’t want it to come to this,” she mumbled, burying her face in her hands. When she looked up again, her unchanging affection for Yuder remained.

“Well, considering your nature, it’s probably why you ended up facing that mad Baron on behalf of others this time too.”

“…”

The sudden accusation startled him. It was like hearing what he thought would be said by Kishiar in advance, and he felt irritated.

“But I really like that about you, Yuder. That’s why… I’m so worried about you.”

“You don’t have to worry. I’m fine now. What happened earlier was just a phase. Time passed and I’m back to normal.”

“It’s not that kind of problem…”

Kanna’s voice trailed off as she exhaled a long sigh. She followed it with a frustrated groan, rubbing her face vigorously with her hands. Her agony and torment were evident.

“Kanna, are you sure it’s not because of me? If it’s so uncomfortable talking to me, how about discussing it with the Commander?”

“No! No, but… fine, I’ll tell you. It’s my problem. It’s because of my ability.”

No sooner had Yuder suggested consulting with Kishiar first than Kanna vehemently rejected the idea and shouted out as if she were a machine gun.

“Your ability?”

In that moment, Yuder felt a sudden chill creep down his spine. There was only one issue that would make Kanna this anguished and blame it on her own ability.

“…Did you read something from me?”

Yuder recalled a previous conversation where Kanna had mentioned the difficulty of controlling her rapidly-developing ability, which sometimes read information from those around her without warning. Yuder had considered the possibility that one day he too could be read. Fortunately, her ability didn’t go as far as reading people themselves or peering definitively into their memories. He had judged that if needed, there was plenty of room for explanation.

But this was sooner than expected.

“Ugh!”

Instead of answering, Kanna bowed her head once again, burying her face in her knees. Her ear tips, visible through her neatly combed and pinned-up bobbed hair, had turned a vivid red.

Yuder thought the only information to be read from him would naturally relate to his past life, but her reaction was oddly curious.

‘Could she have read something related to my previous life?’

Just then, the slow knocking of a door accompanied an outside voice.

“I heard Yuder is awake. May I come in?”

It was Kishiar. Kanna quickly corrected her posture and sprung to her feet, rushing toward the door.

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The person who stepped through the open door was not alone. Nathan Zuckerman, who had skipped today's party, quietly followed behind Kishiar.

"As soon as I received the news, I came. Has anything out of the ordinary happened in the meantime?"

"No."

Kanna responded with a tense face.

"You've done a lot. I'll leave you in charge of leading the remaining members back to headquarters."

"Understood. Then I'll take my leave. Also, I'll give this back to you."

Bowing her head slightly, Kanna glanced at Yuder. Her gaze was filled with complex, indescribable emotions.

" Yuder. See you later."

Yuder was deeply curious about what information Kanna had gleaned from him, but now didn't seem like the time to inquire.

'I guess she's not avoiding me like before I should talk to her properly when I get back.'

After Kanna left, Nathan Zuckerman closed the door behind him to ward off any potential visitors who might come to the lounge.

Finally alone, Kishiar dropped the smile he had been wearing. Approaching him was a man exuding a mix of various smells, from

alcohol to food, suggesting he had been constantly on the move.

“How are you feeling?”

“I’m fine. I apologize for causing you concern.”

“Looks like you really have woken up.”

Kishiar let out a soft sigh. Sitting across from him, he asked Yuder what he remembered up to this point. Yuder detailed the events that occurred when he met Kiolle, and what happened immediately afterwards.

“So you remember my coming and going, but not the specifics of our conversations?”

“Yes.”

“Any idea why you got suddenly intoxicated?”

“I felt intoxicated after receiving treatment for the wound on my hand. I suspect something related happened in that interval. Did you find out anything related to this?”

“Yes. The object that wounded your hand belonged to a knight from the Diarca Family who had served the Emperor five generations ago when he was a Crown Prince. It was made from the fang of a monster called the Red-winged Drakandia.”

Kishiar spoke smoothly, without hesitation. While listening to him, Yuder felt astonished.

‘I didn’t know such a minor detail…’

He had known that the material symbolizing the red color of the Crown Prince’s escort knights was made from monster byproducts, but he had never anticipated that this detail could lead to his current situation.

Normally, even if he had a ‘weakness,’ such a minor wound wouldn’t have affected him much. In fact, thinking back on his past life, wounds inflicted by monsters healed more slowly and resisted magic and medicinal treatment, but they ultimately healed, and he never found them particularly inconvenient.

‘Could the problem have been that I was injured while I had consumed Quelochet?’

In retrospect, the small scratch seemed to bleed continuously, refusing to clot.

“I don’t think Kiolle Da Diarca did this intentionally. But don’t take this matter lightly either.”

“What do you mean?”

At Kishiar’s words, heavy with implications, Yuder looked up. Kishiar’s face tightened, his expression a smile that wasn’t quite a smile.

“Apparently, my assistant has a tendency to underestimate the power of what he himself has publicly acknowledged as his ‘sole weakness.’”

“…”

“A mundane drink can become poison depending on the person. You can see that from the not-so-rare stories of people dying from alcohol. So what would a drink designed to exploit a ‘weakness’ do to you?”

Yuder broke the silence, finally speaking.

“Do you think what I experienced was more than mere intoxication?”

“The sensations felt by those who are drunk and those experiencing mild withdrawal symptoms can be quite similar. If my assistant had ever been drunk on some other drink, he could have differentiated between the two. But if he has never been intoxicated by something unrelated to his ‘weakness,’ how can he be sure it was just simple drunkenness?”

That was indeed the case. Aside from the drink made with monster blood that contained poison, and what he had consumed today, Yuder could not say with certainty that he had ever been intoxicated.

A heavy voice, laden with implications too significant for phrases like “I was fine,” echoed in his ears.

“This time, the effects were not severe and you recovered quickly, which is fortunate. But we cannot say for certain that it will be the same next time. You understand what I mean better than anyone else.”

“…Yes.”

“I know why you drank the Quilochet, and if I were in the same situation, and thought I could handle it without any slip-ups, I would have done the same. So, I won’t say anything more about that. But now that both of us have come to know facts that we were previously unaware of, should a similar situation arise in the future… your judgment must be different.”

Kishiar made it clear that this was all he expected.

Even though his tone remained calm, the weight of his words was immense. Yuder knew that every word was correct, which made them all the more impactful.

“Is there anything else you’d like to discuss about this matter?”

“Nothing, Commander. My judgment was inadequate. It won’t happen again.”

Shaking his head, Kishiar exhaled deeply and closed his eyes. As his penetrating red gaze disappeared behind his eyelids, a restless tension bubbled up within Yuder.

That tension seemed to stem from an inexplicable urge that could only be alleviated by seeing those eyes again.

Finally, Kishiar opened his eyes. Gone was the emotionless face of the Cavalry Commander, replaced by the warm expression of a deeply passionate man.

“…Yuder.”

“Yes.”

“Come here.”

Without a word, Yuder moved closer. The man took his hand and gently guided it onto his lap before speaking again.

“Place your hand here.”

As Yuder extended both hands, the man took out a pair of white gloves from his lap and began to silently put them on Yuder’s hands, one at a time. They were the very gloves Yuder had worn earlier but had taken off after being wounded.

The scent that enveloped him as their bodies drew near was deeply intoxicating. It made Yuder want to close his eyes and lose himself in it.

“Would it be alright to ask how you knew in advance that Quilochet would be given to you?”

After completing the right glove, Kishiar started on the left as he asked the question. Yuder had been contemplating discussing this point in more detail since the party, so he readily responded.

“I didn’t exactly anticipate that it would happen. I merely thought various methods might be employed, and one of them happened to match. I also considered the possibility that it could be a gift to someone else, not me.”

“Various methods, you say.”

Kishiar paused while fitting the glove onto Yuder’s left hand, seemingly contemplating the torn part that had scratched against a pin. Silence filled the space for a moment. Yuder could almost sense the multitude of thoughts crossing Kishiar’s mind with just that phrase.

“Do you remember earlier, when I visited, you talked as if you’d been drunk like this multiple times before?”

“Did I say that?”

That was something Yuder hadn’t considered. His confused blinking was met with a faint smile from Kishiar.

“I’m telling you because it’s unfair for me to remember something you said while you don’t. But judging by your expression, I don’t need to ask further.”

“Did I say anything else?”

“Most of what you said was endearing.”

Even though he had little memory of it, Yuder felt that must be a joke.

Kishiar didn’t let go of Yuder’s hand, even after putting on both gloves. He leaned forward and tenderly kissed Yuder’s nape. The overwhelming sensation instantly scattered Yuder’s lingering questions like fog. Yuder tightened his grip on their entwined hands and pulled Kishiar toward him.

The moment their eyes met, nothing else was needed. Kishiar’s lips met Yuder’s in a kiss that conveyed more emotion than a hundred words could. They both felt a renewed understanding of how bodily warmth could express far more than spoken language.

“Did you get a message that Her Majesty the Empress wishes to see me?”

Yuder broke the long kiss and spoke softly.

“No.”

“I told her I would come.”

“Then it seems I will set foot in the Dawn Palace after a long time.”

Kishiar declared his intent to accompany Yuder as if it were the most natural thing in the world.

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They left the break room as if nothing had happened. The hall where the party had concluded was long empty, and quiet had settled in. The only thing left in the silent space was the massive head of Pethuamet, placed on a cart to be later transferred to the Sun Palace.

Yuder stared silently at the head, which cast a shadow as if a symbol of something.

Throughout the party, he had seen many who had avoided and feared that head. However, some people bravely approached it, inspecting it closely and even thanking the Cavalry or asking about events that had taken place in the west. A good number among them were either related to houses friendly to the Emperor or those who had directly benefited from the west being their homeland.

These were sights Yuder could not have seen during the Harvest Festival, when many had deliberately ignored the very existence of the Cavalry. It was proof that changes were happening continuously, even in places that were not directly visible to Yuder’s eyes.

Although Yuder himself had contributed to killing the monster quicker and differently than in his previous life, he wasnt responsible for the changes that followed. The ones shaking a world that had seemed set in its courses were Emperor Keilusa and Kishiar.

No matter how much people like Duke Diarca tried to suppress the existence of the Cavalry and the changing world, things would not roll along as they did in Yuders previous life.

For that very reason the Emperor must survive, he thought.

“What are you thinking so deeply about? Are you perhaps regretful about leaving that behind?”

“No,” Yuder replied, breaking his reverie and turning away. Kishiar, who had casually glanced at the head of Pethuamet, narrowed his eyes, emitting a sound of approval.

“Good. I was feeling quite relieved to leave it behind. It would have been slightly tragic if you were feeling regretful.”

Yuder calmly refuted, stating that he, too, felt better about leaving the head behind. Kishiar burst into laughter, prompting Nathan Zuckerman, who was walking ahead, to turn around with a curious expression. Yuder thought his gaze was strangely similar to Kanna’s.

Thus ended the grand party held to celebrate the Cavalry.

—

“Sir Kiolle, what is that you’re holding in your hand?”

“It’s a symbol of an escort knight for His Highness,” Kiolle responded, trying to maintain his composure as he heard the slow-rolling sound of the carriage wheels on the way to the Bright Palace. He had been holding it in his hand out of fear of losing it, surprised that it had been noticed and commented upon.

“Is it broken?”

“The pin fell off by accident earlier. I’m planning to have it repaired on the way back.”

“Unfortunate. It seemed fine before you left your position. Did it happen on the way back?”

“Yes.”

“There’s a superstition among the escort knights that dropping your symbol brings bad luck for a while. Be careful.”

“Thank you for your concern.”

He had been unaware of the superstition, but hearing it now made everything suddenly feel unfortunate.

‘Then again, the whole situation is already unfortunate’

The information he had heard from Yuder Aile today and the tasks he needed to focus on were already headache-inducing. And now, the Crown Prince, who had never shown an ounce of interest in him since he became an escort knight, suddenly struck up a conversation. Had he raised suspicions when he stepped away earlier? Even though Kiolle believed it unlikely, he felt extremely uneasy, as if he were sitting on a bed of thorns.

And as if sensing that discomfort and deliberately prodding at it, the Crown Prince opened his mouth again.

“But, who exactly is it?”

“Excuse me?”

“I’m talking about the one you consider important enough to leave the party to meet, and with whom you’ve spent such an engrossing time that you’ve lost your emblem.”

Kiolle was so surprised that he almost gasped for breath.

“Wha-, what do you mean? I don’t quite…”

“I have ears too, you know. I’ve heard rumors that you’ve had a ‘deep meeting’ with someone during the previous party in the palace, enough to catch the eye of patrolling guards. Was the person you met today the same one?”

“…”

A pale Kiolle recalled Yuder Aile, whom he had encountered during the party on the last day of the Harvest Festival. That day, Yuder had grabbed Kiolle’s collar and feigned intimacy to avoid the gaze of the patrolling guards. Kiolle had thought he’d successfully buried those rumors, so they wouldn’t lead back to him. Had he not?

‘No, more importantly, does he really not believe my excuse?’

Apparently, he didn’t believe him, and he was correct in assuming that Kiolle had met the same person both previously and today. However, it seemed he didn’t know that person was from the cursed Cavalry.

But the ‘deep meeting’ the Crown Prince was hinting at was absolutely, positively not the case between Kiolle and his companion. The emblem that Kiolle had lost wasn’t because they had a deep relationship; it was a simple, unfortunate mistake. Checking the condition of an old emblem was the servant’s job, not his own.

Meeting Yuder was a matter with not a shred of shame. Kiolle felt a slight guilt toward his father, but if things were sorted out, both his father and the Crown Prince would surely understand! It was an act full of sincerity and concern.

The Crown Prince was clearly deeply misunderstanding something.

‘I’m not some sort of philanderer!’

But Kiolle couldn’t figure out what to say to correct him.

Kiolle’s slightly parted lips trembled. Yet, to the Crown Prince, that shiver seemed to indicate something else entirely.

“You seem surprised. I didn’t mean to probe. It’s just a little sad to think that even you, the Duke’s most cherished child, might have secrets you can’t share with your parents. Judging from the times you’ve left, I can roughly guess who this person might be.”

“I… I…”

“It’s fine. I have no intention of speaking about it elsewhere.”

“…”

“By the way, I noticed you headed in the direction of the lounge when you left. Did you happen to see the assistant of the Cavalry Commander while you were tending to your business?”

“No!”

Kiolle reflexively raised his voice and shook his head. It was one thing for Prince Katchian to know he had lied to step out and meet someone; it was another matter entirely to reveal he had met Yuder. That had to remain a secret at all costs.

“As for that, I could hardly have seen a subordinate without his superior, secluded in the lounge. How could I possibly notice someone like that?”

“I see. That makes sense. Although the Empress was showing interest in him, I was just a little curious as to why he didn’t appear till the end of the party.

“Why are you interested in such a person, Your Highness?”

Kiolle’s face, flushed from his surprise, made it appear as if he was the one questioning Katchian’s integrity. The Crown Prince tilted his head slightly, maintaining his calm demeanor.

“Why? Is it so strange for me to take an interest? Are you going to tell the Duke that I asked about him?”

Naturally, Kiolle couldn’t comply. As he kept his mouth shut, a faint smile spread across Katchian’s face.

“I told you, I was merely ‘a little’ curious.”

””

“Having seen a new side of you through today’s party, I find myself more at ease, hence this frank discussion. I’m beginning to regret having found you difficult to approach until now.”

Amidst the abrupt change in atmosphere, as Kiolle’s head swirled in confusion, Katchian shifted the topic and made an unexpected proposition.

“Kiolle, would you care to join me tomorrow for a game of strategy while we await the arrival of the healers? It’s been a long time since I’ve had an opponent for such a game.”

What in the world was this? Was the situation saved or not?

‘In any case, I need to learn more about those scamming healers I guess agreeing would be the right move.’

“Yes, I understand.”

Kiolle nodded with a grimaced face. A fine smile appeared on Katchian’s enigmatic and fluctuating visage.

“You made a good choice.”

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Chapter 520

“Your Majesty, it seems that Duke Peletta, who had stayed until the end, has finally left Cantameria Palace. Additionally, the Empress has also arrived safely at the Dawn Palace.”

“Is that so?”

After the party had ended and all the visitors had left Cantameria Palace, Emperor Keilusa was in his own residence, the Sun Palace. His face, now free from the weight of his elaborate clothing and makeup, showed unmistakable signs of deep fatigue.

Seeing the Emperor’s condition worsen beyond the usual, the chief attendant cautiously mentioned a potent yet dangerous herb known for its strong analgesic effects.

“Would you require tea infused with Ponesa?”

“No, the usual will suffice.”

By “the usual,” he meant tea made from herbs sent by the Empress. The chief attendant quietly brewed a pale green tea and placed it before the Emperor. Only after sipping half of it did the Emperor’s complexion slightly improve.

Holding the steaming cup, he soon spoke in a neutral tone.

“How is Baron Aile’s condition?”

“Given that Duke Peletta left without any word, it appears there was no significant issue. Baron Aile was able to walk on his own and even joined the Duke in the carriage.”

“That’s a relief. What about Baron Durmand?”

“He has yet to regain consciousness but is undergoing treatment. According to the palace physicians, his symptoms are mild and he should be able to rise by tomorrow. Several people requested to visit and care for him, but all were denied. Knights are stationed around him to guard against any possible assassination attempts.”

Though the questions were similar, the chief attendant’s response was far colder than when speaking about Yuder Aile before. The Emperor’s gaze also mirrored this coldness.

“Instruct that no one is to meet with him until Duke Peletta sends the results of the investigation regarding the liquor he brought in.”

“Yes.”

“Also, thoroughly investigate who leaked information to Duke Diarca today, and look into their circumstances as well…”

The Emperor continued to issue a series of commands without pause. His voice seemed to waver, but the chief attendant nodded without questioning. Only after concluding the official matters did the Emperor pause to sip his now-cooled tea.

Upon reopening his eyes, his expression seemed softer than during official discourse but nonetheless complicated.

“…Yuliver.”

“Yes.”

“What do you make of the words Duke Peletta said to me earlier?”

The chief attendant, who typically gave immediate responses, unusually hesitated to answer this question.

Today’s party had gone in unexpected directions. Duke Peletta was scheduled to display his will alongside the Cavalry on behalf of the Emperor. That had happened, but the way it unfolded puzzled everyone.

No one had foreseen the dance between Duke Peletta and Yuder Aile. The Cavalry had moved as though they had been waiting for this cue.

Both the aristocrats led by Duke Diarca and the Emperor himself were shocked by the actions of his brother and his assistant. Naturally, summoning Kishiar was the immediate consequence.

Entering boldly as if expecting the Emperor’s summons, the handsome man in a black formal suit faced him and calmly stated,

“I had already informed you about this matter when we last met, Your Majesty. You granted me complete authority over all matters related to the Awakener. I deemed this the most appropriate time to exercise that authority.”

Kishiar had told the Emperor that he had no intention of dismissing the recent scandal about him in the West as mere gossip. The Emperor was not entirely convinced when Kishiar mentioned using the rumors to change the fate of Awakeners with the second gender, but he suspected that Kishiar had a plan.

However, he had not expected Kishiar to act so quickly, and in this particular manner.

The Emperors younger sibling, Kishiar La Orr, was an Awakener with a second gender. Since the second gender was, after all, not significantly different from the first, there was little one could say against Kishiar’s actions. There was still no formal law concerning those with the second gender.

While he was taken aback, the Emperor understood what loophole Kishiar was trying to exploit and what he hoped to gain by doing so. This realization only complicated his emotions further.

In the end, the only thing the Emperor could say was, “Didn’t you say it wouldn’t harm me, the Empire, or your assistant?”

“My intentions then, and now, have not changed,” Kishiar responded.

The brazen gleam in his sibling’s eyes was unexpectedly filled with sincere seriousness. A certain emotion carried within those eyes left the observer at a loss for words.

In the moment the Emperor found himself taken aback by an emotion he had not expected from Kishiar, the Empress, who had been sitting at a distance, stepped forward.

“Do you intend to attend such functions with other second-gendered Awakeners in the future?”

“To give you a precise answer, yes and no,” Kishiar answered smoothly.

“I only intend to attend with Yuder Aile after today.”

The Emperor felt dizzy. The faces of Yuder Aile, whom he had recently met at a dinner, and the rumors about his sibling began to intermingle in his mind.

Kishiar had often played the part of a harmless, eccentric individual to avoid seeming threatening to others. But that was merely an act. The brother the Emperor knew was extremely pleasant and considerate, but also very strategic and patient, a person not even he could fully trust.

Kishiar also knew very well how to make use of rumors surrounding him. While normal nobles or imperial members would have already engaged or married for various reasons, he never once lamented his own forbidden engagements or marriages due to his reputation and the political climate.

Therefore, the Emperor had never thought he'd see the day when Kishiar would have a woman at his side, and he didn't take the recent rumors too seriously.

But what was that look in his eyes?

The Emperor swallowed a low groan, belatedly realizing he should have found it more strange that his sibling was rumored to be involved with a man for the first time.

As for Yuder Aile, the young man who had received the highest award today and seemed to have a bright future ahead of him, the Emperor harbored genuinely good feelings. He was an extraordinary talent who possessed an uncommon combination of politeness, caution, and unwavering belief, difficult to associate with a commoner's upbringing.

Moreover, he was someone who was seeking ways to help with the Emperor's "situation," something he had nearly given up on himself. While he had pushed them away to prevent making their efforts futile, it did not mean he was not surprised.

If the person accompanying him was anyone other than Kishiar, the Emperor would have definitely considered putting him under his wing for greater tasks.

But for such a person to be dancing with my brother that is a matter that surpasses mere fondness.

Especially under the current circumstances, where the Emperor, with his increasingly frail body, has decided to change the

environment surrounding Kishiar as much as possible.

At that moment, shocking news arrived that Yuder Aile was having a confrontation with Duke Diarca at the party, rendering him speechless. Rising swiftly from his seat, the Emperor could only muster a word to Kishiar about needing to meet Yuder Aile again next time.

After Kishiar left, the Emperor, lost in complex thoughts, heard the Empress speak.

“From now on, it seems no one will be able to forget the uniqueness of the Awakener and their second gender. Discussions will undoubtedly resume on establishing related norms. However, it seems the Duke’s intentions do not solely lie there I feel ashamed for being close to him yet unaware of his thoughts.”

””

“I too will have to reconsider aspects I hadn’t thought of before. Two heads are better than one in reaching a better conclusion, so don’t worry too much.”

Her comforting words seemed to understand the shock and concern the Emperor felt. Swallowing the rising pain and sentimentality in his chest, the Emperor nodded quietly.

“My apologies, but as your servant, I only consider matters that won’t cause you concern.”

As the Emperor concluded his thoughts on Kishiar and exhaled deeply, Yuliver, the chief attendant, bowed his head. It was not that the Emperor had sought significant advice from him, so he did not blame him.

“Yes, it will all become clear when I meet him again.”

””

Confidence, reason, and ambition.

The Emperor murmured these words as he closed his eyes, pondering what Kishiar had mentioned gaining through Yuder Aile.

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Chapter 521

Despite some hiccups, the celebration party for the Cavalry was quite the talk of the empire, both domestically and internationally. The rare appearance of Emperor Keilusa and the generous rewards he bestowed undoubtedly contributed to the buzz.

Inside the empire, many nobles were not fond of the Cavalry. However, the view from outside was a bit different.

Within less than a year, the Emperor of Orr and his brother had achieved remarkable results by employing Awakeners, whom many had believed to be dangerous aberrations. The Cavalry, predominantly composed of commoners, had demonstrated discipline that rivaled the Imperial Knights and Court Magicians during the Harvest Festival. They also promptly quelled the sudden surge of monsters in the west. Considering the significant losses suffered by the neighboring western countries, Orr had barely lost anything in comparison.

That wasn’t all. They even discovered a vein of magic ore in the Great Sarain Forest. While similar veins had been found over the years, none compared in scale to this discovery in the Great Sarain Forest. Rumors began to circulate discreetly that those interested in researching the vein, and those greedy for the rights to exploit it, were showing unprecedented interest in the Cavalry.

This development gave serious cause for concern among the noble factions that had been firmly backing the various lords. If Emperor Keilusa managed to secure this vein properly, he would establish an unparalleled level of influence and support, something they were loath to see. Any attempt to obstruct this would only benefit other nations and disgrace their own empire.

They were caught in a bind. Even trying to get a piece of this pie seemed impossible now, as it was too late. Moreover, the influence of Duke Tain had already waned, as he was too preoccupied with fending off threats and fighting against his own family.

Despite consistent assertions by some high-ranking nobles, including Duke Diarca, that “the vein discovered in the Great Sarain Forest is not as valuable as it seems, and what the Cavalry has done is nothing special compared to others who have served the nation,” their arguments were losing steam. This was because Emperor Keilusa publicly displayed the massive head of Pethuamet, which Yuder had presented.

The ordinary citizens of the empire were simply thrilled by the monumental achievements made by Awakeners who were just ordinary commoners. They were hopeful for the prosperity that the discovery of the massive vein would bring to the west.

Thus, the celebration party for the Cavalry took on even greater significance. People began to recognize individual members of the Cavalry and remember the unique abilities each possessed. News of Yuder receiving the title of Baron became a symbol of upward mobility among those weary of life’s struggles, and his interactions at the party were seen as shocking developments among those who heard about them.

And the protagonist of it all, Yuder, was currently riding in a carriage towards the Dawn Palace, where the Empress resided, in the company of Duke Peletta.

“…I hear Baron Durmand is soon retiring to his ancestral lands for recuperation,” Yuder looked at Kishiar, who sat leisurely in front of him and spoke.

“It seems he could blame the drugged punch at Quelochet on someone else, but couldnt shake off the shame.”

“Indeed.”

Baron Durmand woke up after the party only to face ongoing investigations. Thanks to the aid of his close associates, he managed to shift most of the blame onto others who had helped prepare the festivities. Nonetheless, escaping completely unscathed was impossible. It was thanks to Kanna’s secretive and persistent investigation into his association with Quilochet, the information of which was relayed to Kishiar.

Certain that no one would discover his secrets, Durmand was shocked to see them revealed from various quarters. Ultimately, he sent an apology letter to the Cavalry, stating, “I swear to God, I didn’t know the potion contained forbidden substances, but I acknowledge it was my reckless mistake to bring it as a gift.” He also paid a hefty fine. As the intended recipient of the apology remained ambiguous, Yuder found the letter useful as a target in the members’ training exercises.

Duke Diarca, who would normally have protected Durmand, openly ignored him this time, making no effort to hide his deep disappointment. When one loses the favor of someone who has been giving support, options tend to dwindle rapidly.

Despite being a distant yet close relative and a friend as intimate as the tongue in one’s mouth to Duke Diarca for decades, Durmand found his downfall to be alarmingly quick and easy.

Perhaps it was all the easier to discard him precisely because he had been such a close associate, Yuder thought.

Keeping Durmand around served only to maintain the status quo. However, demonstrating that even someone as close as he could be so ruthlessly cast aside was a way to instill a sense of urgency among those around.

Moreover… making Durmand's punishment so public might also serve as a warning to me and the Cavalry, Yuder mused.

Reflecting on the behavior of Emperor Katchian and nobles from his past life, the answer came easily. When they couldn't directly chastise the person who had angered them, they would openly punish a subordinate in front of everyone to make their intentions clear. That was their idea of noble conduct.

The Duke would have preferred to ostracize and expel Yuder, but unable to do so, he chose to send a message through Durmand.

I'm not the least bit intimidated by such warnings; they'd do better to show their hand, Yuder thought.

Just then, Kishiar asked in a discreet yet significant manner, "If it bothers you that he didn't apologize directly, would you like me to arrange an opportunity? I can fabricate some external affairs on a day when you go down to the fief."

"No, it's fine."

Thinking of Gakane, Yuder wanted nothing more than to give Durmand the most perilous journey home, but the man was too insignificant. It wasn't the time to take the Cavalry away from their many pressing tasks.

Hearing the clean refusal, Kishiar added as if an afterthought, "Should you change your mind, feel free to tell me. Oh, and speaking of the investigation, I found something interesting. It seems related to what you have been researching."

"What is it?"

"It turns out that Baron Durmand was the one who initially introduced the Crown Prince's healers to Duke Diarca. After they cured him of his chronic migraines, he began to trust them deeply."

Yuder’s eyes narrowed ever so slightly.

“…I see. Thank you for letting me know.”

The surveillance activities on the Star of Nagran by the Cavalry’s intelligence division, which had begun even before the party, continued. Excluding Yuder, the members each collected information in their own way and took turns keeping watch over the residence where they were staying. Yuder expected that Enon, who had not participated in the rotation, would share information in his own way when the time came.

It was a most opportune time to investigate the surroundings of the man who had first made contact with the Star of Nagran, linking them to Duke Diarca and the Crown Prince. Nobody paid much attention to him these days.

“We’ve arrived at the Dawn Palace.”

Not long after, the carriage came to a stop.

Yuder stepped out and looked up at the Dawn Palace, a place he had scarcely visited even in his previous life. Unlike the Sun Palace, which emanated the aura of an ancient temple with its immaculately maintained, isolated buildings, the Dawn Palace was a harmonious blend of structures connected by beautiful corridors and bridges, giving off a cheerful yet majestic atmosphere.

“Your Excellency Duke Peletta, welcome.”

The chief maid of the Empress, Algorita, who had been waiting for them, bowed her head in a formal greeting. Lifting her head, she began guiding them with a smiling face, informing them that the Empress was expecting them.

“It’s good to see your face again.”

As they crossed a large pond and entered the Emerald Room, a space where the Empress held formal meetings with guests, she greeted them. Yuder noticed that the clothes she wore seemed oddly familiar. Kishiar seemed to recognize it too, a smile twinkling in his eyes as he spoke.

“Are you wearing the gift I sent?”

“I’d heard these types of clothes are becoming popular, so I grew curious. As it was timely sent by you, Your Excellency, I thought I’d try it on.”

“You look absolutely stunning. Even the emeralds in this place could not possibly shine in the face of Your Majesty’s beauty and dignity.”

“Enough with your jokes. Even in jest, it could be considered an ill omen by those who hear.”

“Why the grim words? The god knows the truth in my words, my aide knows it, and even His Majesty at the Sun Palace would vouch for it. Who would see it as an ill omen?”

Finally, the Empress let a smile creep onto her lips, amused by Kishiar’s sycophantic charm, which was as playful as the last time they met.

“To be honest, I was a little surprised to hear that you would be coming, considering how busy you seemed to be after the party.”

The Empress, who had discreetly requested a meeting with Yuder after the party, had sent an invitation letter not even three days later, just as she had said. In truth, Yuder had also judged that Kishiar was likely too busy to accompany him, but he got into the carriage before Yuder with a very relaxed expression, as if he had never been so busy.

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“You’re mistaken if you think I’m too busy. That’s not the case at all.”

Kishiar grinned with a carefree expression on his face. It was a smile befitting of the idle Duke of Peletta, yet the Empress wasn’t fooled by it.

“So, are you saying you didn’t accompany Baron Aile just because you didn’t want to send him alone?”

“Partly, yes. But I must also add that today’s visit presented a splendid opportunity to meet Your Majesty in the Dawn Palace, an opportunity I did not want to miss.”

Astoundingly candid as his answer was, the harmony between Kishiar’s smiling face and his articulate words managed not to cool the atmosphere in the slightest. Yuder watched Kishiar smoothly converse with the Empress and couldn’t help but think how remarkable he was.

In the end, it was the Empress who first conceded.

“Very well. I understand why you’re here, so no further explanation is necessary. I’d like to talk with Baron Aile now.”

As the Empress snapped her fan closed, Kishiar sealed his lips with a quiet smile.

Yuder sensed that the slight tension he’d felt when he first sat down had long since dissipated. The Empress also appeared more relaxed compared to their initial exchange, as she turned her gaze and began speaking.

“Baron Aile, have you been in good health since the party?”

“Yes, thank you for your concern.”

“That’s good to hear. I was pleased you accepted the invitation, but I was also concerned we might be burdening the hero of Great Sarain Forest unnecessarily.”

The Empress knew why she had to assist Kishiar and Yuder during the party. Only after hearing that Yuder wasn’t suffering any aftereffects from Quelochet did she breathe a sigh of relief and offer a subtle smile.

“The reason I wanted to meet you today, Baron, is to hear directly from you about your recent actions. Though the palace is a place where one hears many stories, none compare to hearing the truth directly.”

Yuder had a vague idea of what the Empress wanted to know specifically, but he simply answered, “Yes.”

“Please feel free to ask me anything you’re curious about.”

“Alright. Then let’s start with your life and journey before joining the Cavalry. I heard you lived deep in the mountains before coming to the capital. What made you decide to do that? Were you already confident you’d pass the Cavalry’s entry test?”

So, we’re starting there.

Yuder took a quiet breath and responded respectfully, though his expression remained unchanged.

“As you mentioned, the place where I lived was a secluded mountain valley, a half-day’s travel from the nearest village. After my grandfather passed away, my opportunities to meet other people

dwindled, making it hard to gauge my abilities even after my awakening.”

The Empress nodded slowly as Yuder continued, mentioning how he had come across recruitment information for the Cavalry and decided to come to the capital out of a desire to test his own abilities.

“When I first saw you, you seemed very well-mannered and remarkably composed, so I was quite surprised to learn your actual age. I’ve heard you have extensive knowledge of your abilities, enough to teach your fellow members. Did you gain this knowledge through your awakening?”

“Partially, yes, but not entirely. Some of it came from testing my own abilities, but much of it… I had the opportunity to learn from someone else before.”

“Did you say you had something to learn from meeting another Awakener?”

“Yes.”

Kishiar’s gaze met the space just above Yuder’s face. Despite sensing it, Yuder did not turn his eyes toward him. After all, Kishiar should already know some of the story, as Yuder had briefly mentioned something similar to his comrades, including Kanna and Gakane, in the Great Sarain Forest.

However, what Kishiar might think upon hearing the story nowgiven that he had more information and had speculated deeply about Yuder’s secretswas uncertain.

“What sort of person was it? One individual, or multiple?”

“…It was one person.”

The Empress seemed to surmise that Yuder had learned various things from another Awakener by fate while living in the mountains. Given that many had abandoned their hometowns to flee to isolated areas or chose a life of wandering after the appearance of the Awakeners, regardless of their social status, her assumption wasn't entirely unfounded.

"If that person was skilled enough to teach the Baron, that person could be of help to the Cavalry as well. Do you still keep in touch?"

"That person is someone I can no longer meet."

There was no notable change in Yuder's expression, but his eyes momentarily darkened. The Empress suspected that the person Yuder spoke of had long been dead, as she detected a distant look in his eyes even as their gazes met.

Instead of directly apologizing for touching upon an uncomfortable memory, she phrased her words carefully.

"I see. It's a pity. However, some relationships carry meaning in the meeting itself. Since you, Baron, have achieved great things here because of that encounter, the whole Empire will be grateful for that relationship."

Yuder blinked, feeling like he was hearing something utterly unfamiliar.

'A relationship the whole Empire will be grateful for.'

Even Kishiar wouldn't think that, given his past life, but it was true that the life he had then has been a great help in this rerun of time. Even so, it felt peculiar.

The Empress then shifted the conversation to what Yuder had accomplished since joining the Cavalry. Starting from the retrieval of the Red Stone to his tasks in the western dispatch and events in

Tainu, her range of questions was incredibly wide and unexpectedly insightful.

Just as she had asked about who had taught Yuder, her ability to delve into peculiar details indicated an open-minded and broad way of thinking.

Yet, she did not cross any boundaries that would make her interlocutor uncomfortable. The conversation flowed smoothly, making her appear quite different from the quiet and shy character that was her public image.

‘She may be naturally quiet… But that doesnt mean she’s unaware of her surroundings. Rather, her ability to grasp information is quite remarkable.’

Like a reed swaying in the wind, she might seem only gentle and modest, but that was not the entirety of the Empress. People like her could be exceptionally strong in certain aspects.

And perhaps, the subject where the Empress could demonstrate her strength would be matters related to Emperor Keilusa.

Just as Yuder had assessed the Empress, she seemed to have similarly assessed him. She looked at Yuder with slightly different eyes now, and posed a question of a somewhat different nature.

“Baron Aile, on a different note… I heard that you shared a rather surprising story when you visited the Sun Palace with the Duke to meet His Majesty, is that so?”

The conviction was clear that this was the most important reason she had summoned Yuder.

“Even after hearing the news, it was hard to be certain if such a thing was really possible. However, personally, it was news that filled me with so much hope that it was hard to keep my heart from racing.

His Majesty has acted as if he's never heard such talk since, but I'm personally curious about your opinion, Baron Aile. Has your opinion remained unchanged, both then and now?"

The Empress knew exactly what had been discussed when Yuder and Kishiar had dined with the Emperor in the Sun Palace. She made no need for explanation about the conversations that had taken place; her eyes shone vividly and desperately, clearly indicating she only wanted to know Yuder's opinion.

Yuder looked at the Empress's tightly clenched lower lip and gave the most cautious and clear answer he had ever given.

"Yes, my opinion has not changed, then or now. Given the opportunity, I intend to act on behalf of His Majesty."

"…"

The fingertips of the Empress, who had been holding a fan, quivered slightly.

"What about the Duke?"

Her gaze moved past Yuder to Kishiar, who had been silently observing the conversation. With a smile that seemed to say he finally had the opportunity to reveal something he was proud of, Kishiar set down the cup he had been holding.

"Of course, my opinion has also not changed. Even if His Majesty ignores what I have previously said, I will never give up and intend to act, along with my assistant."

"I've heard that following Baron Aile's opinion could put the Duke at risk as well. Do you still say the same?"

"Faith does not come when one is afraid of the impossible," Kishiar responded.

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Kishiar’s red eyes were unwaveringly calm. It naturally evoked the memory of the day of the party when he had answered, without any hesitation before the Emperor, about who he had danced with. Facing that familiar yet strange face once again, the Empress studied him quietly, with utmost scrutiny.

Kishiar La Orr, who she had thought she knew well, was as complex internally as he was radiant externally. There was always a trace of exhaustion and self-mockery in his eyes. Perhaps it was the physical limitations that even his power could not overcome, and the challenging circumstances around him that even his extraordinary abilities struggled to navigate, that had shaped him this way.

But the calm he exhibited now was different from before, when even impurities seemed to sink deep into an unfathomable lake.

Here was a man who, in planning and executing any scheme, never easily offered full trust or confidence, now showing steadfast belief towards a single person. It was as if he were a fortress that had never crumbled despite facing the weathering of a thousand years.

“I am a living witness who has seen up close how Baron Aile has toppled what was considered impossible,” he began. “I can swear without a shadow of a lie, having tested the possibility of success with my own body. Please, Your Highness, trust him as you would trust me.”

””

“And please, offer your assistance.”

The Empress remained silent for a long time. Finally, when she spoke again, her eyes were slightly moist.

“I assume you already know that His Majesty broke years of seclusion to emerge for the Cavalry, and that it was solely for the Duke. It seems he has already excluded himself from future plans, contemplating ways to leave more for the Duke and the Cavalry.”

The Empress encapsulated the deepest thoughts of the Emperor more profoundly than Kishiar could.

“Among those plans is appointing the Duke as the Crown Prince based on the strength that the Cavalry will gain. Are you aware of this?”

‘Crown Prince Kishiar?’

Since returning from the west, the Emperor’s actions clearly indicated that he was strengthening the Cavalry and Kishiar. But Crown Prince? It was a startling revelation, something that could never have happened in a previous life.

Yuder involuntarily turned his gaze towards Kishiar. The man, showing no trace of a smile, quietly responded.

“This is the first time I’ve heard of it. But aren’t Your Majesties the ones who know best that I have long been Duke Peletta?”

“Knowing doesn’t mean we can just let go and surrender. Although it might be impossible by imperial law, His Majesty has been searching for a way to make it happen for quite some time. And I did not stop him.”

””

“After our child left us and His Majesty became as he is, the Duke became the only remaining precious hope for both of us. We

searched every way to heal His Majesty and were prepared to do anything. But if achieving that carries the risk of losing our last remaining hope it's not a decision anyone can make easily. I understand more deeply than anyone why His Majesty hesitated."

Under normal circumstances, Yuder would have rejected the hope presented just as the Emperor had. However, the look in the Empress's eyes, her heart, spoke a different truth.

"The Duke really is… not afraid of anything, is he?"

Though she didn't explicitly say what the fear was, the multiple meanings contained in her voice were clear.

"And what about you, Baron Aile? Do you feel the same?"

Her gaze now shifted to Yuder.

Yuder wasn't afraid of striving to save the Emperor. There was no need to be afraid of things that obviously needed to be done. Dancing with Kishiar, or any potential consequences of that, held no meaning for him. Even if the Emperor and Empress couldn't trust him in the end and sought to distance him from the Cavalry and Kishiar, it would be the same. Gender, social status, and the immediate opposition and skepticism couldn't deter Yuder's intentions.

However, if there was something that might qualify as fear for him, it was the concern that some problems might arise for Kishiar La Orr during the process.

And that sole exception seemed already to know what Yuder was thinking, quietly sending him a gaze.

Detaching his eyes from Kishiar, Yuder spoke first.

“Your Highness, I fully understand your concerns. However, knowing that I have the power to help His Majesty the Emperor, I do not wish to step back out of fear.”

“You’re that confident? Even though this has never been achieved before? You’re not afraid of what comes after a potential failure?”

The Empress added weight to her voice for the first time. The atmosphere grew so intense that most people would instantly back off. But Yuder was not the least bit intimidated by the vexation she seemed to deliberately project.

“Yes. If I have to be blunt, the regret of not even trying would be a far greater regret for me.”

The Empress’s eyes flickered. Yuder met her gaze directly as he spoke.

“This is not boasting, but I am confident that no one can do better than me in matters related to the power of the Awakener. Even if you find my words inadequate, please believe just that. It’s the most solid proof I can offer to Your Highness.”

“…”

“Please, give us a chance.”

“Yes, I share the same sentiment.”

Finally, Kishiar quietly agreed with a smile.

The Empress let out a breath that seemed like a sigh.

The tension left her eyes, and a sad smile adorned her face.

“You’re someone who makes all the worries before meeting you meaningless.”

“…”

“Alright. I’ll help.”

The Empress finally promised her assistance. She seemed stronger than anyone else as she pledged to provide an opportunity for treating the Emperor, despite not holding significant political or social influence.

“I will make sure the opportunity you need, Baron, will be provided. Until then, Duke, please prepare with the Baron to make sure this precious endeavor doesn’t fail. If you need anything for the preparations, feel free to ask. And… before the final trial, please pay a visit here so I can also directly experience the process and results.”

“Isn’t that a risky suggestion? Just receiving your help would be enough to incur great wrath. Adding a trial on top of it would make me more afraid of the consequences, to be honest…”

Kishiar slightly furrowed his brows as he smiled. However, the Empress did not smile back.

“Of course, the risk is not yours alone to bear. I won’t send you to His Majesty without verifying the process myself.”

“Yes, understood.”

At Yuder’s reply, the Empress nodded.

“I’m glad you are certain, Baron Aile. Now I see why the Duke values you so much.”

“…”

“I trust you.”

The Empress promised to persuade the Emperor as soon as possible. Before leaving, Yuder planned to demonstrate his method of enhancing internal energy using the power of the Red Stone in front of Kishiar and her.

In the middle of the reception room, from which even the maids had been sent away, Kishiar lay down comfortably, and Yuder sat in front of him, placing his hand above Kishiar's abdomen. As he took off his gloves, the deep red veins on his hands briefly startled the Empress, but she quickly composed herself.

"I can sense the energy of the Awakener within a person by touching them. After becoming accustomed to the power of the Red Stone, I was able to go further and manipulate that energy."

After briefly explaining, Yuder closed his eyes. A moment later, his palms warmed, and he felt the presence of the Awakener energy within Kishiar's body, protecting him as it always had.

Taking a deep breath, he began to draw upon the power of the Red Stone to unlock Kishiar's internal energy. As he did, energy flowed out of him, and a soft breeze began to circulate, sweat forming on his forehead.

Moments later, an array of colored energy emerged above Kishiar.

"Ah…"

"Do you see?"

"Is this really…"

The Empress could hardly continue her sentence as she stared in awe at the spectacle before her.

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The energy of four distinct colors seemed to be alive, swirling around in unique patterns. The sight was both terrifying and mystical.

“Does it… hurt?”

“No, I’m perfectly fine. But I must admit, I feel a bit embarrassed revealing myself like this in front of Your Majesty the Empress.”

The Empress’s unease quickly dissipated, thanks to Kishiar’s words, which somehow seemed even more awkward than when he had strolled barefoot around Tainu’s party. Nonetheless, the overwhelming sensation she felt from simply watching remained.

“Does Baron Aile know which color represents which energy?”

“Of course.”

Yuder proceeded to explain the colors and locations of each energy, saving the red energy that cautiously moved along his hand for last.

“And this is the energy of the Awakener. While the energy in most people is usually located below the abdomen, Commander’s energy moves in a form that not only fills the vessel but also envelops and protects the surrounding force. This differentiates him from other Awakeners.”

“I see. The vessel…”

The Empress’s gaze shifted towards the massive conglomerate of energy that seemed lodged at his core. Long-standing emotions were revealed in her eyes as she looked at the red energy that solidly enveloped and supported the turbulent vortex. Seeing the

actual entity causing suffering and leading her husband, the Emperor, towards death did nothing to uplift her mood.

Yuder ignored her expression and continued to explain his earlier attempts. The Empress's expression returned to normal upon hearing that he had successfully drawn his energy into Kishiar's body using his abilities.

"Truly remarkable."

"Then I shall conclude the demonstration here."

The light faded from Yuder's hand, and everything vanished as if it had been an illusion. Kishiar sat up and smiled.

"It feels like I've grown more accustomed to controlling it over time. The strain on my end also seems to have lessened. Are you alright?"

"I am fine, fortunately."

"You might be fine, but it must have drained you. Here, have something to eat."

Kishiar casually handed Yuder a bite-sized snack. Coincidentally, it was the last one left. Yuder hesitated momentarily, but the Empress, still lost in the lingering awe of what she had just seen, was not watching them.

"…"

"Don't worry. It's very delicious with the chocolate. You haven't eaten at all while talking, have you? Go ahead."

Just as Yuder succumbed to Kishiar's tempting whisper and put the snack in his mouth, the Empress abruptly looked up. After an awkward exchange of glances in silence, she finally spoke.

“You don’t have to sneak food. I brought it for both of you to share.”

“Sneak? I openly offered it out of concern for my assistant, who seemed drained.”

Kishiar feigned ignorance effortlessly.

“In that case, will one suffice? Would you like to fetch the next plate for you yourself?”

Since the maids who usually perform such duties were outside while they were demonstrating their abilities, only the three of them were left in the reception room. Kishiar rose gracefully from his seat, wearing a sly smile.

“Of all the commands I have received from Her Majesty today, this is the one I was hoping least to hear.”

He lifted the empty plate with the tips of his fingers at a perfect angle, stood up straight, and walked away without making a sound. His posture was so impeccable that Yuder briefly questioned his eyes; if not for his appearance, one might have believed him to be a servant from any palace.

“The Duke has always been able to disguise himself as any rank of palace official if he puts his mind to it. You probably won’t find another imperial family member who can mimic a servant so perfectly in all of Orr’s history,” the Empress said with a faint smile and a sigh, almost immediately after they were left alone. Her voice carried a sense of familial warmth that was different from the Emperors. It was the voice of someone who had spent a long time with Kishiar, her real family in many ways.

“In truth, there are matters I wish to discuss alone with you, Baron. I temporarily dismissed the Duke for that reason. Is that alright?”

“Yes, of course.”

Kishiar had probably departed so obediently because he already suspected the Empress’s intentions.

The Empress looked into Yuders face for a moment as if selecting her words, then seemed to make up her mind.

“Baron, the truth is, my background is quite flawed. Officially, I am recorded as the second child and first daughter of the Duke of Herne, but that record only dates back to when I was 12. Do you understand what that means?”

A person who was recorded as a child of the Dukes family at 12 years oldthat was simple enough to understand. It meant that the Empress was adopted into the Dukes family quite late.

‘I hadn’t known that before.’

The Empress continued her story with a faint smile, noting Yuder’s composed expression.

“The Herne family is renowned for their scarcity of daughters. For decades, they hadn’t even produced a single Empress because daughters were so rare. I was adopted from a distant branch of the Herne family because I had a slight talent for magic, to fill the symbolic position of a potential Empress Consort. No one thought that I would actually stand where I am now. Even the Herne family didnt wish for such an outcome.”

A shadow flickered over her cold yet candid expression.

“From then until now, the only ones who have stood by me are His Majesty and the Duke of Peletta.”

The weight of her words was enormously heavy.

“No matter how much you’ve shared about yourself, Baron, I find it difficult to form a full judgment about you. Perhaps it’s because I sense that what you possess is not solely comprised of what you’ve shown.”

Yuder’s heart raced a little faster than usual.

“Nonetheless, I have felt the Duke’s reason for choosing you, and I’ve felt the sincerity of your loyalty to His Majesty. That is enough for me to accept you.”

“…”

“So, the reason for this rather dull conversation is to ask if you have the confidence to walk a path like mineor even a more difficult one. Right now, everything might seem smooth, but life is rarely so accommodating.”

The Empress posed her final question with a palpable certainty in her voice.

“Do you have the confidence to stand by the Dukes side, even then?”

The question came more from Kishiar’s family than from the Empress of the Empire. What answer should he give? Yuder closed his mouth, lost in thought.

Initially, his mind had flitted through exemplary answers that were as apolitical as possible. But seeing the calm yet anxiously honest emotion in the Empress’s eyes, those thoughts gradually faded away.

He had no desire to offer such a candid answer to someone who was willing to reveal their own weaknesses and faults just to hear it.

“Any answer I give you will likely not bring you much comfort,” he said cautiously. “However, there is one thing I can say.”

“And what would that be?”

“I want to be part of the Empire’s future that the Commander envisions. That’s why I’ve come this far, and for that cause, I’m willing to do whatever it takes.”

“…”

“Without him, there is no future that I desire.”

For a moment, the Empress felt an indescribable shiver at his brief statement. A chilling sensation flowed down her spine, rendering her incapable of any thought.

The weight in his seemingly emotionless voice felt prophetic.

It was stifling, the sense of something unspeakable contained within his words, something she could not begin to guess at.

Staring into his eyes, dark as the depths, the Empress found herself speechless for a long while.

“I’ve brought new refreshments, and the tea has been freshly brewed. The chief maid is asking if she may enter now,” said Kishiar as he returned, pushing a small cart adorned with silver. Only then did the Empress regain her composure. Instead of answering whether the maid could come in, she quietly observed the two men seated before her.

“Your Grace.”

“Yes.”

“You’ve brought a most remarkable assistant.”

“Is that suddenly a revelation?”

Despite the cryptic conversation they’d just had, Kishiar only chuckled casually. The Empress gave a small, relieved smile. Strangely, she felt more at ease.

“Before I go, I’d like to share some news that came through Hernes family intelligence network. While it may not concern His Majesty directly, it could be relevant to the Cavalry, so it may be of use.”

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Chapter 525

As soon as she handed him the small note, a sharp glint flashed across Kishiar's eyes. The atmosphere among the three was incomparably more amiable than before as they enjoyed the newly brewed tea and refreshments. The only awkward moment arose when Kishiar began to more openly offer Yuder some refreshments, which was far more fruitful than anticipated, except for that slight awkwardness.

As they prepared to leave, the Empress looked far more at ease than when they'd first met and made a suggestion to Yuder.

"Since it seems we will be seeing each other often from now on, may I address you more informally in the future?"

"Of course, you may even call me by my first name."

Being referred to by his title of 'Baron' every time was fitting as a sign of respect for Yuder's achievements, but it also lacked intimacy. Yuder felt it would be better to be addressed with a term of endearment or even by his first name.

At Yuder's response, a soft smile bloomed on one of the Empress's cheeks. As a parting gift, she gave each of them a small present.

"It's nothing much, but please take these sachets of dried flowers that I personally grew."

The gift looked surprisingly humble for something from the Empress of the Empire. However, the fact that she had grown and prepared them herself made it an incomparably precious gift.

"I'm not sure if I'm worthy to accept such a valuable item"

“It’s no trouble at all. My magic powers may be meager, but they prove quite useful when growing plants. Keeping it beside you while sleeping will help you relax and have good dreams.”

Eventually, Yuder left the Dawn Palace with the sachet tucked safely in his pocket.

On the way back, Kishiar asked Yuder if anything had been uncomfortable during their visit to the palace. Yuder expressed some concern over learning too much about the Empress’s background, to which Kishiar shook his head with a smile.

“There’s no problem. She would have only mentioned it if she deemed it okay.”

The fact that the Empress wasn’t born into the Ducal family, but was adopted, was widely known. Ever since the daughterless Herne family had adopted her as a temporary measure, planning to later transfer power to candidates from other families, there had been much turmoil behind the scenes.

Kishiar, who had watched it all unfold back then, shared the story lightly with Yuder, realizing how much time had passed since those events.

He had seen the Empress endure being considered a thorn in the Herne family’s side, suffering yet ultimately acting for the Emperor’s benefit.

Despite the snickers of many in high society, who saw the Empress as a lackluster and unnoticeable shadow, she had been a longtime ally, expertly suppressing the ambitions of the Herne family, one of the four Ducal houses, and staunchly remaining at the Emperors side.

“People say she rose to her current position because of her thirst for glory. But the truth is, she wanted nothing more than to be by His

Majesty the Emperor’s side. No one believes it, though.”

“That’s incredible.”

“Truly sublime,” Kishiar agreed.

“In the past, every time I saw them, I would ponder emotions that I believed I would never understand in my lifetime. But on your way to get new refreshments today, it suddenly struck me I already know what those emotions are.”

Intriguing, isn’t it? Kishiar smiled as he gently tapped Yuders cheek. Yuder sensed the warmth that would follow but did not shy away.

For reasons he couldn’t fathom, it felt as though a slight ache tingled inside his throat

After a lingering kiss, Kishiar skillfully drew Yuder into his arms and finally unfolded the note he had received from the Empress. A brief flicker of sharpness crossed his red eyes, a sharpness he had not shown in front of the Empress, as he skimmed over the small encrypted text.

“What does it say?”

“It’s news related to House Diarca. It seems they suspect the possibility of internal spies following this party.”

The Duke of Diarca began scrutinizing his long-standing aides anew and revealed his intention to partially replace the mercenaries owned by his house. On the surface, he said he would bring about change by reorganizing the local security forces, but Kishiar interpreted his intentions differently.

“Judging by the fact that House Diarca’s people are discreetly contacting Awakened mercenaries and adventurers, it’s clear that

the power of the Cavalry has impressed them. Additionally, it seems they're looking for the knight who left a new mark on the Emperor Sword Mark."

Kishiar chuckled as if finding the matter amusing, but Yuder didn't find it funny at all. When all the information came together, there was only one thing he could deduce.

Duke Diarca had decided to abandon his previous complacency and gather new strength.

If he was willing to extend his hand so openly to the Awakeners he had always despised, would that outreach only move outward?

"No."

Yuder spoke, furrowing his brows.

"Is there any talk of reaching into the Cavalry?"

"There was no such mention, but the possibility certainly exists."

If there were already verified talents close at hand, the easiest and simplest thing would be to buy them out or draw them to one's side. If Yuder knew the nobles, they would naturally think this way, and he had been subjected to similar situations in his past life.

'Once newcomers are nurtured to a certain point, about three out of ten always disappear, bought out by those offering more money.'

If the Cavalry was still a small group as it was now, it was possible to address and manage everyone's grievances. However, the larger the group became, the harder that was to do.

It was fortunate if those who were bought out left quietly. Some had grievances with Yuder and had sold off confidential information and data from the Cavalry.

While the initial members were all alive and felt a strong camaraderie and sense of belonging to the Cavalry, one could never be too sure.

“I don’t want to suspect my comrades, but I’ll ask Kanna to prepare for any eventuality.”

“Frankly, I think the ones who’d turn their eyes white to take you away are the real problem.”

Kishiar grinned and tilted his head.

“Do you have any idea how many requests and invitations to meet Baron Yuder Aile poured in after the party? If I exaggerated a bit, we could’ve used them as fuel for the fireplace.”

“I didn’t hear anything about that.”

“That’s because I sorted them all out before my assistant even saw them.”

The man, who couldn’t decide if he was joking or serious about how hard the task was, soon looked at Yuder with a much more serious expression.

“Just be cautious, especially with those who are not satisfied with just written communication and bother you in person.”

“Yes.”

Yuder responded without argument, even if those people would serve at best as post-meal exercise. The man who had been absentmindedly stroking Yuder’s hair inspected the back of the note thoroughly, then crumpled it into a ball and turned it to ash.

“The last piece of information written on the note suggests that a significant disturbance occurred within Nelarn a few days ago. I

haven’t received any detailed information yet, but it seems news has arrived quickly due to our connection with that side.”

“Is it a fight among the princes?”

Had the moment they had long anticipated finally come now that Prince Ejain had safely arrived in Nelarn? At Yuder’s question, Kishiar nodded silently.

“It seems so.”

“…”

“Are you worried about Prince Ejain?”

“No.”

Yuder answered briefly and elaborated.

“Before heading to Great Sarain Forest, I might have been concerned. But since his awakening, there’s likely no one there who could be his match. It would be better to think about the situation after his victory.”

“You’re so certain, even though you haven’t witnessed the prince’s Awakener power yourself?”

It was natural for Yuder to be confident about Ejain’s victory, having seen his abilities in a previous life. However, he had not witnessed the prince’s current Awakener power, so Kishiar’s question was well-placed. Yuder paused for a moment before speaking.

“It’s because I have an idea of the potential of the prince’s Awakener abilities.”

“You speculate on the potential of his abilities… huh.”

Kishiar repeated Yuder's words.

"Is that knowledge something you learned from the Awakener who taught you much, or is it the result of your own acquired experiences?"

Caught off guard by the unexpected probing question, Yuder found himself momentarily speechless.

As Yuder hesitated, a man lightly pressed his lips against the top of his head, as if to say there was no need for embarrassment, and then tenderly traced his fingers down to his earlobe.

"You don't have to answer if you're uncertain. But… yes, I also firmly agree that Prince Ejain will be the victor in Nelarn. We'll know more when we get further details, but along with the relics that should arrive from Nelarn soon, it seems we can expect good results."

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The thoughts and feelings that lay within Kishiar were inscrutable, but at least the touch of his hand as he caressed Yuder's hair remained consistently gentle. Yuder felt his anxiety dissipate surprisingly quickly under that touch.

Hesitating for a moment, he finally spoke with composure.

"You said I didn't have to answer, but… I will. The reason I could speculate on the prince's potential, Your Highness, is closely tied to experience. The person who taught me many things never explicitly instructed me in such matters."

It felt oddly peculiar to talk about Kishiar from his past life as if he were someone else, especially when Yuder knew both the Kishiar of then and now were one and the same. More so since Kishiar himself would be unaware of this.

Kishiar, who had been fondling Yuder's hair, paused and blinked.

"I see. Very well."

"For more details about that, I'm not quite sure how to explain at the moment… so I will stop here. I apologize."

"That's fine. Your answer has given me food for thought."

Kishiar readily responded.

"Is there anything else you wish to know?"

"Hmm. Curious."

Yuder sensed Kishiar’s gaze scanning his face, as if sketching his expressions. A moment later, the corners of Kishiar’s lips lifted faintly.

“Well, even after all this consideration, there’s one particular thing that’s both difficult and intriguing to ascertain through mere speculation.”

“What is it?”

His thick golden eyebrows, which maintained a pleasing balance above his forehead, shifted ever so slightly. The tranquil atmosphere around Kishiar suddenly changed direction.

“Was my assistant truly alright speaking about someone he can’t currently meet?”

Whether he was happy, sad, angry, or even emotionless, Yuder couldn’t utter a word in the face of Kishiar’s question that solely focused on his well-being.

It was always this way. Yuder found it impossible to predict Kishiar’s responses.

There were countless questions that could be raised from the scattered words, but what Kishiar was genuinely curious about was simply Yuder himself. Just him.

As if nothing else mattered.

As if all other conjectures and questions had never existed in the first place.

“…”

In the midst of a sensation akin to being pricked by a needle and emotions he couldn’t even name, all Yuder could muster was a

single statement.

“Yes. Of course… I am fine.”

Kishiar’s fingers brushed Yuder’s head instead of a verbal reply. Wordlessly, they continued to share warmth until they reached their destination.

Finally, as they arrived at the headquarters of the Cavalry and their entwined arms separated, Yuder felt the chill of the sudden coldness that took its place.

He knew this fleeting confusion of senses would soon vanish, that the chill he felt when alone was the norm. Yet, inexplicably, Yuder felt a fleeting pang of pain at that moment. It was utterly astonishing.

He had never felt the cold as a source of discomfort while living alone for an extended period in a mountain battered by harsh winds all day. Yet, the mere loss of another’s warmth could cause such pain. It was a reality he had never before realized.

From the day he had impulsively begun to desire Kishiar, this blind sentiment had grown uncontrollably deeper. And just how far would this change lead him?

It seemed strange that one could yearn so intensely for something even more profound when already bound so closelyboth physically and emotionallyas if woven together by a thread.

For the first time, Yuder found himself afraid of the excessive heat of an emotion he had never felt the need nor the ability to name.

“Uh-huh. So, you’re saying… I should occasionally check around the members of the Cavalry using my abilities to see if the Diarca

Duchy or any other nobles have ulterior motives for getting involved? Is this the only favor you're asking?"

"Yes."

"That doesn't sound too hard! I'll do it when I have time."

After meeting with the Empress, Yuder went to Kanna as he had intended and requested that she keep an eye on those around them. This was the first proper conversation they had had since the party, as both had been occupied with their respective duties. Kanna still didn't come too close to him, but her demeanor had improved significantly compared to before the party.

"If it becomes too difficult, don't push yourself. Just stop and let me know."

"It should be fine. I've been training really, really hard these days to control my abilities. I've practiced prioritizing essential information, so this will be a good test."

"Is that because of me?"

"…"

Kanna smiled awkwardly in the silence. There was no answer, but her silence was affirmation enough.

"I've been curious because I didn't get to hear properly before… what exactly did you read from me?"

Exhaling deeply, Yuder asked earnestly. He wasn't overly concerned, judging by what he had heard before; it didn't seem like she had read anything about his past life. Nonetheless, he didn't want to be the reason for her struggle.

"Uh… would it be okay if I didn't say?"

“Why?”

“Well… people say that to maintain a good relationship for a long time, it’s important to keep a certain distance. Since this happened due to my lack of control, it’s better to bury it and move on rather than make both of us uncomfortable… that’s what I thought.”

That Kanna would suggest moving on without discussing it indicated just how sensitive the issue must be.

Upon noticing Kanna’s cheeks growing increasingly flushed as the topic progressed, Yuder decided it would be best to postpone uncovering the truth behind the matter.

“Fine. If it’s that uncomfortable for you, we’ll move on for now. But since this also involves me, I’ll need to know eventually. You can’t just bury it and move on alone.”

“Ah, right! By the way, did anything happen when you visited the Empress yesterday? I wanted to ask that first but completely forgot. Silly me.”

Kanna awkwardly and abruptly shifted the topic.

Gently looking at her, Yuder obliged her with an answer.

“Nothing special happened.”

“Did she not call you to reprimand you for what happened at the party?”

It seemed like Kanna was harboring the suspicion that the Empress had summoned Yuder to scold him for the events at the party.

“She didn’t mention that day at all.”

“Then what did you discuss?”

“She was curious about what I’d been up to before and after joining the Cavalry, so I told her.”

There were also discussions about the Emperor’s health and about Kishiar, but those were subjects he couldn’t share with Kanna. Instead, Yuder glossed over those details with a simple statement.

“Having the Commander with me meant I hardly had to speak.”

“…Ah, ah, I see. So, it wasn’t just you; the Commander was with you as well… Discussing you…”

“Discussing me among other things.”

“Other things…”

For some reason, Kanna’s words dwindled sharply. To reassure her, Yuder mentioned that he had also received a small gift from the Empress. Naturally, what came to mind next was the most striking part of the conversation he had with the Empress and Kishiar that day.

‘Imperial Heir.’

In an era where many things were changing rapidly, it was crucial who would lead the nation. Nelarn, who had the opportunity to grow faster by obtaining a faster-winning Heir than in his previous life, was a prime example.

‘It took less than five years for Nelarn to dominate the small countries in the west in my previous life. Things can only be the same or better now, as no disasters have occurred yet.’

It was welcome news that Emperor Keilusa seemed to be considering switching his successor from Katchian to Kishiar, at least from the standpoint of someone who had already seen the future. But what about Kishiar himself?

When he heard those words, Kishiar did not make his intentions clear and moved on. However, the response that questioned whether he was no longer the Duke of Peletta could be interpreted as leaning more towards denial than affirmation.

But if Kishiar were open to becoming the Imperial Heir…

If the day comes when he wishes for it…

Ejain, who had survived tough times, enduring attacks from his late father and his brothers, eventually succeeded in toppling all of his siblings and seized the throne. Would it be more difficult for Kishiar to become the Imperial Heir?

‘If we proceed with Katchian and Diarca unharmed, there could be a situation close to civil unrest…’

It was not impossible if laws were ignored and only brute force was applied. That was Yuder’s assessment. However, there was an important point missing.

The path of change shown by Kishiar and Emperor Keilusa may seem frustrating, but for the most part, they chose methods that would cause the least amount of bloodshed among ordinary imperial citizens.

By that standard, the just-considered approach of ignoring the law and pushing through with force alone was impossible.

‘Victories obtained through bloodshed are hard to recognize. If you’re prepared to see the opponent’s blood, you must also be prepared to shed your own.’

Yuder’s eyes, which had turned cold for a moment, returned to their usual state. Ultimately, what was most important to him was Kishiar’s own will. There was no need to jump ahead now.

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Chapter 527

“Yuder, so there’s nothing more you need from me now?”

Lost in thought, Yuder lifted his head at the sound of Kanna’s cautious voice.

“No, there isn’t.”

“What’s next, then?”

“I plan to meet Gakane and Devran in a bit, but there’s no urgent need to see them right now. Why?”

Upon hearing his reply, Kanna’s eyes widened, as if she had just realized something. “Ah.”

“So those two are up to something lately, right? It seemed like they were investigating something, but they haven’t told anyone else, so I’ve been curious. Is it a mission you’re involved with too, Yuder?”

“Something like that. How did you know?”

“I knew it! It’s definitely not because my abilities suddenly acted up or anything like that! Gakane has been looking a bit gloomy lately, and as I observed, I noticed something different. I only just found out you were involved, too.”

As always, Kanna was sharp without even having to use her abilities.

‘Ever and Steiber seems to have not been caught on so far… Avoiding Kanna as well would have been difficult.’

It wasn’t strictly necessary to keep secret from their immediate superiors that a new intelligence unit had been established within the Cavalry or what investigative mission they were carrying out. However, part of their role moving forward would be to ensure that even perceptive people like Kanna wouldn’t notice anything.

‘There’s a significant difference between not hiding something we could have and failing to hide something we tried to.’

Still, it wasn’t bad for a first attempt, as the names of the Eldore siblings hadn’t come up. Had they been implicated, Kanna, who had been on a mission with them in the West, would have easily figured out what they were up to.

Yuder decided that he needed to inform his intelligence colleagues of Kanna’s discovery, and he openly explained their current mission to her.

“It’s not an assignment from the Commander. There’s something I personally want to investigate, and I’m doing it with Finn and Hinn as well.”

“Ah, is it that thing Hinn and Gakane were really looking forward to in the West?”

“Yes.”

“I hadn’t noticed anything different with Hinn and Finn. So they’ve finally started, huh?”

Kanna seemed a little disappointed that she hadn’t figured it out, but she didn’t forget her primary responsibilities as Deputy Commander. Even if she added her current duties to her role, she’d be overwhelmed even if she had three bodies.

“If you ever need my help, feel free to ask!”

“Will do. But why did you ask if I was busy earlier?”

“Ah, right. Lost my train of thought there.”

Kanna blinked her eyes and looked around.

“Yesterday, while Hosanna was awake, he requested a meeting with Gayle and Doyle. I think it should be fine, but I thought you should come along just in case.”

“Hosanna?”

“Yes, he usually wakes up around the same time, so he should be waking up soon.”

After Hosanna had finally opened his eyes, Yuder had strictly limited who could be around him and had entrusted Kanna with overseeing him. During the time when everyone else was preoccupied with party preparations, Kanna had been juggling her time between Hosanna, Gayle, and the Doyle brothers, reading information from them.

The Doyle brothers would occasionally ask for something from Kanna or other members, but Hosanna spent most of his day still asleep while never letting his guard down. That he had agreed to meet was likely due to Kanna’s warm and engaging personality.

‘I was planning to probe the three of them about the “Sage” currently in the capital anyway. This works out well.’

“Alright, I’ll go with you. But about the favor you said you could do for me earliercan I ask for it now?”

“Huh? What is it?”

Kanna looked at Yuder with cautious yet curious eyes.

—

The brothers, who had been eating fruit behind the Cavalry canteen, were startled almost to the point of fainting when Yuder suddenly appeared. However, they calmed down after hearing Kanna's explanation.

"So, Hosanna really called for us?"

"Is it really okay to meet him?"

"It's fine if Yuder says it's fine. Just don't forget that Hosanna is still not well."

"Of course!"

The brothers quickly washed their fruit-sticky hands and followed the two.

"Is the person inside awake?"

Upon reaching the room where Hosanna was staying, Kanna asked the guard who was standing watch. Kanna had entrusted Hosanna to Yuder a short while ago to go eat some snacks. In her absence, Hosanna had woken up, making it difficult for Kanna to ever escape guard duty.

He looked up at Yuder with a momentary sad expression and then nodded.

"Yes, it seems he just woke up… Priest Lusan is in there with him."

"Got it. I'll go in first to explain, so everyone just wait here for a bit."

Understanding why she was saying that, Kanna patted Yuder's shoulder consolingly and went into the room first. Yuder felt the glances from the brothers but ignored them.

A moment later, Kanna poked her head back out.

“Hosanna’s condition is stable. Come in.”

On Hosanna’s wrist was a cloth strap, still tied gently. Lusan, who was observing his condition, greeted them with a faint smile. Yuder requested that he step out for a moment.

As soon as the young Priest left, Gayle and Doyle rushed toward the bed where Hosanna was lying.

“Hosanna!”

“What happened to you? Where are you hurt?”

“…”

Although Hosanna’s face looked better than when he first woke up, it was still incredibly pale in comparison to before. He struggled just to sit up; how long it would take for him to be able to walk was uncertain.

The gaunt young man from the south exhaled a thin breath, his eyes filled with guilt as he looked at the brothers.

“…I’m glad you’re well. That’s fortunate.”

“Yeah, yeah, fortunate or not, we’re doing fine here so even last ti Ow!”

Doyle jabbed Gayle in the side as he began to carelessly mention the past.

“Ouch, why’d you hit me?”

Forgetting they were there to see a patient, the brothers started squabbling among themselves. They only quieted down when their eyes met Yuder’s. Whether it was difficult to discuss anything more

than pleasantries in front of the Cavalry member or not, they were visibly uncomfortable. Yet, knowing that he was alive seemed to lighten their expressions.

Yuder opened his mouth to Hosanna, who was quite quiet considering he had first requested to meet the brothers.

“Hosanna. Did you not want to tell Gayle and Doyle something?”

“I just wanted to… make sure they were alright.”

Hosanna muttered, avoiding eye contact. His voice was faint but noticeably stronger and clearer than before. He had a slight accent in his Imperial language.

“See, they’ve been doing well. If it hadn’t been for you and Nahan, they might have been released by now, not confined within the Cavalry. It’s regrettable.”

“…”

Hosanna suddenly looked up, surprised. Gayle and Doyle were equally shocked.

“What? What did you say?”

“You were planning to let us go?”

“I’ve completed all the necessary investigations, and since you guys haven’t committed any direct crimes, there’s no reason to keep you here any longer.”

“So then…”

“Rest assured. What Yuder meant is that it’s difficult to do so right now. We’re not asking you to leave abruptly. If you want to continue working here and getting paid, you can do so formally. It’s better for

both Gayle and Doyle, isn't it? Hadn't you said you wanted to do that before?"

As Kanna interjected and skillfully calmed the situation, Gayle and Doyle's expressions, previously filled with anxiety and doubt, quickly brightened.

"Ah… I see. Of course, that's fine then…"

"The reason you're staying here now is because we've judged your situation to be too dangerous. We're keeping you here for your protection."

"Because of Hosanna?"

"That, and there have been some suspicious activities reported in the capital recently."

"Suspicious… activities? Did Nahan cause another uproar?"

"No. He's untraceable at the moment, starting from the west and continuing until now."

Before coming here, thanks to the brothers who asked questions as Yuder had expected, Hosanna finally revealed a somewhat honest reaction.

"So, you're saying Nahan… has not been captured yet?"

"That's correct."

…

Hosanna did not question the truthfulness of this statement, which meant that he had built considerable trust in Kanna. Yuder quickly read the emotions that flickered across his face.

Relief, worry, and several other indistinguishable emotions mixed in his expression. He was genuinely concerned about Nahan.

‘That guy ran away the moment he knew he failed in his mission, instead of trying to save him.’

“So if it’s not Nahan, what exactly are these suspicious activities?”

“We’ve had multiple sightings of unidentified Awakeners. We think these individuals might belong to the same place as you do.”

“What? Did they come to rescue Hosanna and us…?”

“I highly doubt that.”

Yuder interjected, causing the brothers to flinch simultaneously.

“Because those who’ve appeared in the capital are showing no interest in our area. They’re only in contact with the nobles.”

“Nobles? No one among us is mingling with nobles…”

The brothers’ expressions grew puzzled; they couldn’t even guess who these mysterious people might be.

“So does Hosanna have to live like us from now on?”

“No. Hosanna, you’ll continue to be under investigation. The Commander will decide what to do with you afterward.”

Hosanna said nothing. The conversation came to an end as he drifted back to sleep. Gayle and Doyle looked at the sleeping Hosanna with a somewhat pitiful gaze.

“Half of his face is paralyzed. He’s always been extremely frail… won’t he die like this?”

“There don’t seem to be any injuries, so why does he look so ill?”

“He overexerted himself.”

Upon hearing Kanna’s response, Gayle and Doyle shivered slightly. They may not have known the details, but it was clear they thought it had something to do with Nahan.

‘And they would be right.’

“Uh, by the way, would it be okay to visit Hosanna again next time?”

“You can visit during times when he’s not under investigation. You’ll probably have company, like today.”

“Uh-huh… understood.”

“I won’t make any unnecessary comments.”

Considering they had been in the Cavalry for a while, it was fortunate that they were picking up on social cues. Yuder gave Kanna a nod and then left the room first.

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Chapter 528

Not long after leaving the room, Kanna sent Gayle and Doyle away and joined Yuder.

They strolled down the corridor, engaged in conversation.

“From what I’ve observed so far, Hosanna is fundamentally a quiet and quite decent person. However, he’s someone who would do anything for Nahan,” Kanna said.

“Just as Gayle and Doyle described him,” Yuder agreed.

“Exactly.”

“Why is he so devoted to Nahan?”

Pondering Yuder’s question, Kanna fell deep into thought.

“Well Hosanna is often unconscious, and even when he’s awake, his mind isn’t exactly clear, making it hard to read information from him. But if I had to guess, I’d say they’ve known each other since childhood. That seems to be the reason.”

“Childhood?”

Nahan’s childhoodwords that could only serve to further dry out Yuder’s already barren imagination.

“If I were to summarize the scant information I can read from Hosanna about Nahan, it can be expressed very simply as the pitiful young lord.”

Yuder’s eyes turned icy.

“That’s not a thought a subordinate typically harbors.”

“Mm-hm. Exactly.”

Kanna agreed.

“All the time he’s awake, he worries about Nahan and feels guilt for his own sins. The guilt is so overwhelming that I can’t even read any information about the Sage, although it doesn’t seem like hes hostile toward the Sage, per se.”

“It’s strange that Nahan, who is known to have different intentions than the Sage, has a close comrade who isn’t hostile toward the Sage.”

“That’s why I plan to investigate further.”

Moreover, Kanna said that Hosanna harbored no resentment toward Nahan, even under these circumstances. She even speculated that he would feel the same even if he were to die here.

Is his slow recovery despite being awake due to his lack of will to live? Yuder thought. However, he had no intention of allowing Hosanna to die so pitifully.

“Feeling guilt means he’s aware that what hes done is wrong. I have no intention of letting him die in an escapist manner. So Kanna, I’m counting on you to continue your good work in the subsequent investigations.”

Though the conversation continued as if they were responding to Gayle and Doyle, in truth, everything Kanna had said was information Yuder had gleaned through her from Hosanna.

Both the news that Nahan had not yet been captured and the news about the Star of Nagran appearing in the capital would likely confuse Hosanna. As the person who knew Nahan the best, he probably wouldn’t take it well.

Confusion would make it easier for Kanna to read information and cooperate in investigations. Therefore, Yuder planned to discreetly leak information to Hosanna through Kanna every time they learned something about the Sage or the Star of Nagran, observing his reactions.

Unlike simple-minded people like Gayle and Doyle, Hosanna, as one of Nahan's closest associates, was more likely to know something different from what they had gathered so far.

"Of course. If I notice anything strange, I'll call you immediately."

Having had similar experiences before, Kanna grinned, exuding confidence.

She reached up to pat Yuders back as she usually did, but paused mid-motion, then offered an awkward smile before striding away.

"Heh heh, ahahaha. I'll go ahead. See you later."

"…"

And so, the day quickly disappeared as they dealt with various matters.

After the party, the members of the Cavalry sometimes looked at Yuder with a subtle gaze, but no one openly questioned him or changed their attitude. For this reason, Yuder continued to train and perform his duties with them as if nothing had changed. Whether he had received a noble title, or had danced with the Commander, none of these things seemed to matter in the current Cavalry, which was a relief.

The first moment he had to be by himself came after he had washed off the dust that clung to him from the training grounds and entered his own room.

Walking past vases filled with dried flowers scattered around the room, Yuder picked up a bundle of papers that sat on his bedside table. It was the translated research journal of the First Duke Tain, which he hadn't had time to properly read yet.

Earlier that day, while training, he had taken an injured member to the medical division and briefly met with Enon. While the injured member was being treated by Lusan, Enon had stealthily approached Yuder and whispered, "You should come see me soon; I've finished reading the journal."

This implied that Enon had found something of concern in the journal. So, Yuder knew he also needed to read it as soon as possible.

Bound by a string, the very first page of the paper bundle displayed handwriting that could be considered textbook perfect. At the bottom was written a date, indicating a time almost a thousand years ago. Anyone who didn't know what this was wouldn't realize that it was a research journal.

As Yuder gazed at the faint ink traces that Kishiar had transcribed, he gently ran his finger over them.

Flutter. His finger turned the page.

The progress of my ongoing research has been deemed significant, and thus I have decided to document it in greater detail.

The journal began with utter brevity. There was no grand introduction of the author or lofty exposition about his objectives. Neither were there elaborate personal anecdotes that people commonly included in diaries, nor lengthy accounts of the emotional states experienced during the research.

This must be why it was hard to immediately confirm that the First Duke Tain was the authoreven if it was clear that a mage had written

it.

He must have been incredibly practical and direct, Yuder thought.

The author had used the early parts of the journal to summarize his prior research. He had classified and organized ‘the cursed ones’that is, monstersand had tried to magically determine their strengths and weaknesses.

Whenever other topics were occasionally mentioned, they were of the sort that stated how busy the author had been, delaying the progress of the research. It gave the sense of the author’s deep obsession with this research.

The vitality of the cursed ones is generally far stronger than that of humans. Even without magic, they often exert a similar strength. But that doesn’t mean they don’t die. The source of this is still unknown…

Up until this point, the information would have been better shown to Hellem than Yuder, as it was general monster research. However, the content began to change as it moved into the middle sections.

From a certain point, the author seemed to haphazardly begin and discontinue his classifications and summaries of monsters. Kishiar had transcribed those sections as faithfully as possible, adding a note below that said, “It appears that the author frequently discontinued his writing.”

Intermingled with the haphazard research notes, content resembling a true diary began to appear.

The author had frequent confrontations with someone. Although the name of this person was not mentioned, it wasn’t hard to guess that the author had deeply shared and exchanged opinions about this research with that individual.

However, unlike the author who believed that a thorough understanding of monsters was essential for achieving his goals, his adversary seemed to think that research alone wouldn't suffice.

If we could discover where those cursed beings come from, time itself, unyielding in its forward march, could also be on our side. When I spoke thus, my spiritual father gave no response.

At last, Kishiar came across a passage he had read long ago in Tainu. It was the part of the journal most filled with personal reflections.

After reading, Kishiar added a quick note, followed by a few annotations at the bottom.

"The term 'cursed beings' used for monsters here is something I've seen in ancient records. It was only from the era of the Second Emperor that they began to be referred to simply as 'monsters,' or given names coined by researchers."

"The attempt to find out where monsters come from is considered unusual. Scriptures existed even back then, stating that these creatures were born from the cursed blood of the Black Moon that fell upon the world. So, it's unlikely that they would not have known this."

"Spiritual father is an old term used among mages to refer to a master or mentor. While some similarities remain today, at that time, the teachings of a master were considered absolute. A mage without a master was not considered a proper mage, and records about such individuals are scarce."

The last part was what captured Yuder's attention.

"If the author of this journal is indeed Duke Blake Van Tain, then the spiritual father he mentions would be the Archmage Luma, who was his mentor."

Kishiar had quickly discerned this through a few words, based on Yuder's own speculation.

Yuder quickly flipped through the journal. The term "spiritual father" appeared occasionally throughout. The author had multiple confrontations with his mentor, lamenting that his mentor did not seem to find value in his research.

The author thought that his mentor harbored thoughts that werent shared with him, and he was certain he was secretly conducting other research. If his mentor was indeed Luma, then his suspicion was likely not misplaced."

Eventually, the long-standing feud between the journal's author and his spiritual father came to an end, marked by a statement that he had lost contact with his spiritual father for an extended period.

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Chapter 529

Ah Research continued even after this point.

Yuder quickly flipped through the pages, skimming their contents.

The author had presented his research anonymously and seemed to have attempted various magic experiments. However, the tales woven from archaic jargon and complex magical terminology didn't particularly interest Yuder. Even if something important was hidden among those lines, he believed that Enon would probably be better at discerning it than he was.

Enon would get mad if he heard me say that, but oh well

Unabashedly, he continued reading until he reached the last page.

There, a few hasty sentences were scribbled.

Suffering from a terminal illness brings forth various regrets. Although my research yielded practical gains, it did not clearly provide the answers I sought. After my father's death, the only one who held the same questions was my Spiritual father. What did he gain? Where is he now after leaving Gyllandr Hill with the scripture

I leave this here because I believe he may return someday. If it's him, he'll undoubtedly decipher everything written here.

With those telling lines, the research journal came to a close. Kishiar had also added his own notes at the end, writing, "Gyllandr seems to be a word from an ancient language, but its precise meaning is unclear. The last sentence is entirely in archaic script, and the ink is smudged; the reason for this is unknown."

” Archmage Luma disappeared from the Empire a few years after the death of the First Emperor. Though he is said to have had little to do with temples or faith, the truth is unknown. Thus, the part about him leaving with the scriptures is somewhat enigmatic.”

Could the scriptures symbolize something else? He pondered but couldn’t come up with an answer. However, another phrase caught Yuder’s attention more than anything else: *After my father’s death.*

Who else could be the father of the first Duke Tain, if not the famous Founder and First Emperor of Orr?

“It’s hard to imagine how the death of the First Emperor could impact both this research and Archmage Luma, but I suppose it’s worth looking into.”

He wondered if this was the same matter that Enon had been concerned about.

The first Duke Tain, who sought the origins of monsters. Luma, who researched time reversal. Their enigmatic confrontation, and the First Emperor of Orr. Names from a past that should have no relation to Yuder Aile, who was living a thousand years later.

Yuder stared at the last page laid out before him and finally closed the book. It was then that he noticed a very faint imprint on the blank back page.

What’s this?

Focusing his eyes, he saw that the imprint was left by a pen tip that hadn’t been inked. As he traced it with his gaze, his eyes abruptly halted.

“Yuder.”

Yuder Aile.

The moment he realized that the faint imprint spelled his name, an indescribable sensation surged through him, making his blood rush and his heart pound furiously.

The markings were in Kishiar's handwriting, albeit in a different language. Yuder gently touched the spot where his own name was written with the tip of a dried ink pen. He imagined the man who had written his name one character at a time after completing the translation.

A neat repetition, but a scribble that would be invisible unless one paid close attention.

As he felt the texture through his fingertips, he was reminded of Kishiar's voice calling out to him. At the same time, it was as if a small current sparked through him.

"…"

Yuder briefly lifted his finger, then furrowed his brow and lowered his head.

Kishiar had written this translation while Yuder had left for a few hours under the pretext of meeting Enon. Imagining him writing it down as he waited for Yuder's return, and even inscribing Yuder's name in an unnoticeable spot with any time he had left, made it impossible for Yuder to repress his sentimental feelings without biting his lip.

Especially when he considered that in some way, the waiting continued even now.

Yuder thought of Kishiar's red eyes, which prioritized Yuder over any other questions or waiting. He then took a deep breath and made up his mind.

‘Enon told me to come soon… It wouldnt matter if that meant today, would it?’

“You looked busy; I thought you’d come a few days later. What brings you so quickly?”

“I just finished reading the translation the Commander gave me, so I was curious.”

“Hmm. Alright. Come in.”

Enon’s room in the Cavalry was located right next to the medical division. It was an optimal location to both take care of severely injured patients and sense the presence of unexpected visitors at any time.

As Yuder entered the room, which smelled strongly of dried herbs, he got straight to the point.

“Did you find anything about the journal?”

“If you’ve read it all, you’d know. It’s because of what’s written at the very end.”

Enon fetched the original journal and opened it. He pointed to the last page.

“First, this. Gyllandr Hill. I know where it is.”

“What?”

“Its the name of the house where Luma stayed while conducting his research. To be precise, it was until I woke up.”

Enon nonchalantly revealed the identity of Gyllandr Hill, ignoring Yuder’s rarely altered expression as he continued speaking.

“I was planning to go there soon anyway. Thought there might be something useful.”

“Can you go?”

“I can. Dont ask for details. Next, look at this.”

“Why this section?”

This time, Enon pointed to the sentence, “If its him, he would naturally understand whats written here.”

“This part is written in enchanted ink. Its obscured by multiple layers of illusions, Luma-style. Unless you know Lumas magic well, like me, you won’t be able to understand it.”

“Ah”

It then occurred to Yuder that Kishiar had noted that he could not figure out why that particular sentence was written in a hazy and complex manner.

“The Commander had also marked that sentence as strange.”

“Really? Hes not deeply schooled in magic, yet he noticed that?”

Enon’s expression changed very oddly before he scowled.

“Ah, whatever. Anyway, when you break it down, it reveals this.”

As Enon brushed the sentence in a peculiar way, claiming that even though he couldnt perform magic, he could decode this, new text appeared on the previously blank page beside it. At a glance, it seemed to be quite a significant amount, covering multiple pages.

The journal appeared to be left unfinished, as if its author had died before using up all the paper. As it turned out, however, there was morehidden in the empty pages.

“After a certain amount of time, it will disappear, so it won’t last much longer. The guy who wrote this journal left his thoughts freely penned before he died. From my perspective, this is what really matters to you.”

The tension sharply escalated upon hearing these words.

“What does it say?”

“You may recall I once mentioned that maybe Luma began his research after encountering someone like youa person who could travel back in time. Do you remember?”

“I remember.”

“If we assume that everything written here is based on facts, then that person might have been the First Emperor of this land.”

It was a shocking statement. Yuder recalled the writings of the first Duke Tain, who wrote that after his fathers death, he and his spiritual father, his mentor, had been wondering the same thing. Yuder slowly opened his mouth.

“You’re saying the First Emperor might have been like me? How? Are you sure?”

“I can’t guarantee its accuracy. What’s important is that it seems both the author of this journal and Luma believed so.”

The revelation felt so unrealistic, so absurd, as it was utterly unexpected.

‘I almost want to ask if I’ve read something wrong.’

However, Yuder calmed himself, realizing that his own experiences would sound no less implausible to others.

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Chapter 530

In the past, Yuder had heard that the power to manipulate time simply did not exist in this world. However, the living proof that such a thing might be possible was Yuder Aile himself. As incredible as it seemed, he had no choice but to acknowledge its potential.

I would have to see the original text with my own eyes to be certain… but according to Enon, Luma must have had a reason to start this kind of research.

One thing was certain at the moment. Even if the First Duke Tain believed in it and carried out the research, he ultimately failed to obtain the answer he sought.

“The information is a bit scattered, but some parts do feel similar to what I remember Luma saying.”

“I’d like to see and read it for myself as well.”

For a matter of such gravity, hearing about it was not enough. Sensing a question in Yuder’s eyes, Enon frowned deeply and crossed his arms.

“I didn’t expect you to come this quickly, so I haven’t written the translation yet. I’ll send it along with this journal once it’s done. And it’d be great if you could return it for me as well.”

“Alright.”

Enon made a stern hand gesture, his face full of reluctance to go through the trouble of returning the experimental journal to Kishiar himself.

“Ah. There’s one more thing to discuss.”

“What is it?”

“Remember the magic energy that was concentrated in the Great Sarain Forest Where they discovered a magic ore vein there.”

Enon’s expression darkened as he mentioned the place that the mages of the Western Mage Union had once referred to as a “magic spring.”

“In this journal, there’s something that could reveal why the magic energy was concentrated there in the first place.”

“The cause?”

Magic energy, which naturally flowed like water, wasn’t supposed to accumulate in one place for an extended period. However, in the Great Sarain Forest, an inexplicable, ancient magic was obstructing its natural flow. For nearly a millennium, the accumulated magic energy had unnaturally accelerated the growth of the forest, making it one of the most monster-infested lands on the continent.

The forest, which had been a nuisance as it devoured the borders of various nations and was filled with gigantic trees too difficult for ordinary people to even scratch, had suddenly calmed down when the accumulated magic energy was released and the ore vein was discovered.

Enon had previously speculated that someone might have arranged the place to act as a “magic spring.”

But now Enon’s words suggested… Could the culprit behind the concentration of the magic energy be the First Duke Tain?

Noticing Yuder’s questioning gaze, Enon offered an explanation.

“The author of the journal, during his research on monsters, realized that areas with frequent monster appearances have

distorted magic energy flows. He speculated that deliberately distorting the magic energy flow in a specific area might produce specific results… It's a similar line of thinking."

Considering that the Great Sarain Forest had been formed by slowly accumulating magic energy in a specific area, Enon's words were indeed plausible.

"There's no record in the journal that such an experiment was actually conducted. But it's hard to say that there's no correlation, in my opinion."

"So you're saying, either the one who wrote the journal or someone else who knew of this concept could have done it."

"Exactly."

Yuder found Enon's words to be both logical and plausible.

Creating such a space would not have been ordinarily difficult, but if there was a goal that required gathering magic energy in that manner… Perhaps one of the astonishingly talented mages from long ago might have considered it worthwhile.

"That's all I want to say. This might not be of interest to you, but I wanted to mention it anyway."

"It seems like something the Commander would like to hear."

Yuder was genuinely grateful to Enon. There was nothing more reassuring than his presence, given his extensive knowledge of long-forgotten magical lore and the Archmage Luma, which others were unaware of.

However, Enon's expression changed abruptly to one of distaste upon hearing the words of gratitude.

“Forget it. I don’t want to imagine what he’d like, so just don’t say anything.”

“But”

“No! I said I don’t want to know! It’s not like I looked this up for him! If you feel even a bit sorry for me having to monitor the Awakeners without any days off because of you, then just say thank you!”

In the end, Yuder could only respond quietly with, “Thank you,” bowing under the weight of Enon’s fierce anger.

“Is that all you’re really going to say?”

“Thank you, brother.”

Yuder added another word, and only then did Enon’s rage subside.

“I received a message from Dawn Palace earlier. It seems we’ve been granted permission to check on His Majesty’s condition. We will likely enter the palace this evening, and depending on the circumstances, we may even spend the night there.”

“…Really?”

Yuder lifted his head abruptly at the unexpected news that struck his ears. It was unexpected but truly welcome news. The Empress had kept her promise astonishingly quickly.

Kishiar, who sat in the Commander’s seat, narrowed his eyes slightly and smiled.

“Yes, it’s sudden, but are you alright with that?”

“Yes, of course.”

“And what have you been thinking about?”

Having just finished reviewing and categorizing the correspondence that had come to the Cavalry, and pondering the hidden contents of the journal of experiment he had discussed with Enon, Yuder closed his mouth as if his thoughts had been discovered. Enon had not yet sent his translation of the hidden parts of the journal, and as it concerned the First Emperor, an extraordinary subject, Yuder wasn’t sure what to say to Kishiar.

Kishiar probably didn’t know that Yuder had come across such strange information, but even the thought of the First Emperor was enough to make him feel weird.

If someone else, whether it be the First Emperor or anyone else, had also experienced time traveling back into their past like Yuder, what reason would they have for doing so?

Would that person have also tried to change something? And if so, what did they change? Was the world as it is now a result of those changes? Or perhaps…

“…I was thinking about the translated journal of experiment you gave me. I finished reading it yesterday and met with Enon to discuss it,” Yuder finally said, as if shaking off his tangled thoughts.

“Ah, I see. Was my translation helpful?”

“Yes, absolutely.”

“I’m glad then. It was worth the effort.”

Despite the season being winter, the smile on his face was as refreshing as spring. What expression had he worn when he softly wrote Yuder’s name on the back of the paper with a dry pen tip?

As Yuder tried to discover the unknown face within the familiar one, he realized how foolish he was being and stopped thinking about it.

“Although there’s something difficult to discuss right now regarding that matter… I’d like to inform you when it’s confirmed.”

“Hmm. Seems like there was something interesting, then? Looking forward to it. If there’s anything I can assist with, feel free to say.”

The hidden truth within the journal didn’t seem all that exciting. On the contrary, it was more headache-inducing. But when Kishiar said it that way, it somehow felt plausible.

The sensation was reminiscent of the warmth he had felt in Kishiar’s arms on the day he had returned from meeting the Empress. An irresistible urge toward what the other was offering, after losing a sense of familiarity he had once had alone. Hunger and fear arrived the moment he realized what he wanted.

All those indescribable emotions were now more intense than ever.

“…”

At that point in his reflections, Kishiar’s pen, which had been steadily scratching away, abruptly stopped.

“This is the first time I’ve sensed such a strong fragrance here since the vacation.”

Only then did Yuder realize that he had been emitting a scent toward him. The fact that he hadn’t known until the other pointed it out was profoundly embarrassing.

“I apologize. It wasn’t intentional.”

“Is that so? It’s a bit disappointing if it came out unintentionally.”

The man deeply inhaled before finishing his last signature and putting down his pen.

“It’s good to know I wasn’t the only one who was struggling to hold back. It’s somewhat comforting.”

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As if to confirm that his words were no lie, a sudden chilly fragrance wafted up and mingled with the scent that Yuder was about to capture. Although intangible, it insinuated itself unabashedly. Naturally, it was the scent released by Kishiar.

Yuder felt a sensation as if invisible fingers were tickling his very core. He suppressed a voice that almost involuntarily escaped his lips.

No matter how much he bit the inside of his lips and tried to restrain his surging emotions, it was futile. A part of him that had been parched rejoiced as if a drop of refreshing water had finally quenched its thirst. The fragrance that was about to subside abruptly disobeyed his command and rushed towards the familiar scent.

Visibly, neither seemed to move, but in the unseen realm, it was a different story altogether. If another Awakener with a second gender capable of sensing scents had been present, they would have doubted their senses upon detecting two scents that intermingled so freely they filled the Commander’s office to overflowing.

Twisted together like two ferocious beasts in combat, yet quickly blending into one intoxicating scent, each fragrance stirred something deeper within its owner.

Yuder, with his uniquely tinted eyes, slowly scanned the man as he rose from his seat.

“Shall I come to you, or will you come to me?”

The voice, lowered to an almost oppressive level, tenderly offered choices. Amidst his boiling impatience, Yuder turned his gaze toward the closed door of the Commander’s office.

No one would casually enter. Kishiar had just finished his paperwork, and Yuder had long completed sorting his correspondence. There was nothing left to do until their departure for the Imperial Palace.

‘And then…’

As if contemplating something more for any unforeseen situations, the moment he saw Kishiars tilted head and rising red lips as if awaiting an answer, everything came to a halt.

Fire surged within his chest.

By the time he regained his senses, he was already kissing Kishiar, his arms around the mans neck.

Kishiar entangled their tongues deeply as he pulled Yuder close, his back arching so Yuder could embrace him tightly. Far from feeling restricted, Yuder welcomed the confining arms around him.

The moment their bodies met, a tingling sensation surged from their interlocked tongues, flooding his throat and belly. It felt as if the muscles that had been supporting him were all melting away.

Yuder’s dark eyelashes trembled like a small boat in a violent storm as he strained to look into his partner’s face. When he tightened his grip around Kishiar’s neck, eliciting a faint hum, Kishiar swallowed every bit of that sound, ensuring none of it escaped.

Their legs, tangled in an unyielding desire to get even closer, wobbled. Yet even as he seemed about to fall backward, Yuder had no concerns for what might happen next; he knew the arm around his waist would skillfully guide him to prevent any fall or injury.

As expected, their bodies, swaying and spinning, managed to tumble onto the sofa without parting their lips or suffering any harm.

Only then, as if sinking into water, did their lips finally separate with a plush sensation.

“Haah, ha”

“Haha… There was no music, but for some reason, it felt like those times we practiced dancing, doesn’t it?”

Yuder lay sprawled on top of Kishiar, panting for breath. Kishiar, sunk deep into the cushioned sofa, also mixed laughter with his heavy breathing. The absurd sight of a man lying atop another in such disarray should have been comical, but Yuder couldn’t take his eyes off Kishiar’s golden locks and crumpled clothes sprawled on the sofa.

It was a beautiful sight. Even the few rays of sunlight pouring over him seemed to exist solely to make him look even more beautiful and complete. An absurd thought, but one that couldn’t be helped.

Yuder instinctively reached for his face but halted when his arm got tangled in the draping folds of his outer garment. Looking down, he realized he was no less disheveled than Kishiar.

As Yuder involuntarily furrowed his brow, Kishiar reached out and pulled off the entangled garment. Hearing the sound of the black fabric fall lifelessly, Yuder finally touched his face as he had wanted. He gingerly caressed Kishiar’s cheek with his rough fingertips, and the man tilted his head slightly as if leaning into it. He let out a breath that seemed to come from a deep place within, and his eyes were not much different from Yuder’s.

The eyes, aflame with an entranced heat, yet not knowing what to do with the object of their desire, called out Yuder’s name.

“Yuder”

””

The warmth felt against his palm soon turned into another kiss. The electrifying first brush of their lips became a searing imprint by the second, and by the third, it was as fluid as water on the skin, leaving them both speechless.

As if the utterance of his name had pulled the trigger on something, Yuder collapsed into Kishiar’s arms. It was as though the man had been waiting, as he took Yuder in his arms and kissed his cheeks and neck.

The intensified scent enveloped them, and in response, sweat broke out. Yuder moaned as he hungrily explored the man while simultaneously being explored. His entire being seemed to open up toward him. He had no way to stop the cascade of sensations flooding him from within. It was as if he were standing at the edge of a massive waterfall.

Even the heat he felt below his waist couldn’t stop him. Yuder willingly spread his legs, pulling Kishiar closer through the opening in their clothes.

“Mm Ah”

Though still separated by cloth, the intense contact momentarily blurred his vision. Yuder recognized the sensation. It was the same pleasure that had taken root in his body throughout their vacation, becoming as familiar as another hand or foot.

With swift and rough movements, he cleared the obstacles between them. Both of them were hard to the touch, as if poised for a climax. Despite the illusion that Kishiar’s was too large for Yuder’s not-so-small hand, the moment he touched it, it twitched noticeably, and unbelievably, it grew even larger.

The moment they touched, Kishiar, who had been pressing his lips to Yuder's rapidly beating chest, suddenly let out a feral breath and tensed his body. Hands that had been wrapped tightly around Yuder's waist moved under the fabric. Even without touching the same area, the intention behind each caress was unmistakable as their hands continued to explore.

He had gripped her sweat-soaked waist and back, and every time he caressed her, Yuder flinched reflexively, moaning at the sensation of the touch. Their lower bodies, pressed together, rubbed against each other, offering pleasure. This repeated motion soon became a familiar rhythm.

"Ah…"

Yuder, having forgotten even the thought of removing his clothes, continued to sway his body, following the movement of the hands caressing him. The liquid that flowed from the front soaked his underwear, and the two intimate parts made a continuous, slippery, and lascivious sound.

It wasn't just the front that was wet. Inside, where he knew the sensations that would follow, it felt as if sweat was oozing out, accompanied by a feeling of yearning, contracting and relaxing repeatedly.

Yuder moaned, feeling as if his head was about to explode, and buried his forehead in Kishiar's shoulder. As he gritted his teeth and rubbed his waist, the hand that had been caressing his back pressed gently somewhere between his spine and wing bone.

"!"

That spot had always been one where Yuder reacted strongly ever since they had been intimate. The moment it was pressed by the fingertip, an intense sensation erupted, making his body convulse uncontrollably.

Gasping for breath, Yuder bit down on Kishiar's neck. An illusion of burning overtook his vision as something hot exploded within him.

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Chapter 532

“Ah, hhhhh!”

“Ah, hhhhh!”

The climax was long and intense. It hadn’t been that long since Kishiar and he last intertwined, yet the sensations he felt were as strangely refreshing as a long-awaited liberation.

Leaning his trembling body against Kishiar due to the aftershocks of pleasure, Yuder resumed his halted breathing. Despite having released what needed to be released, his mind still felt hot and foggy.

Was it because the end came so unexpectedly, and too quickly? Instead of the clarity one should feel after climax, lingering warmth swirled around his skin like a haze. Yuder looked down at himself, his breath not yet fully returned, and then shifted his gaze to the solid warmth of Kishiar still held in his hand.

His mouth felt dry, and the scent of his sweat-soaked body grew stronger. Kishiar, no doubt, must have sensed Yuder’s reaction keenly. A deep scent, almost a response to Yuders own, enveloped him gently, stimulating his body as if to say everything was okay.

Kishiar, who had kissed Yuder’s temples and hair, spoke softly with eyes flushed from arousal.

“Have you calmed down? Shall we stop?”

“Don’t talk nonsense… just don’t.”

Yuder knew better than anyone that the fire within him had not yet gone out. He contradicted the intention conveyed by the scent he

gave off. Even if there wasn't enough time left to satisfy him, it was no reason to stop now.

Drinking even a sip of water was better than bearing the unspent flame. At least that was the case for Kishiar. When Yuder responded with a grimace and threw off his gloves and upper clothes, soaked with bodily fluids, Kishiar chuckled softly.

Yuder kissed Kishiar forcefully on the lips to make it clear he had no intention of getting up until every last bit of heat between them was resolved.

"All right… I understand."

As if knowing Yuder's intentions without further words, Kishiar responded softly through their intertwined tongues.

"You should know how much I want you. What a foolish question to ask."

Long fingers slid below Yuder's waist and into his clothes, gripping his buttocks tightly. Just that minor contact made his half-erect body feel completely invigorated again.

When did he become such an embodiment of desire? Although he felt a bit silly, it was still better than satisfying himself alone and snuffing out the fire prematurely.

Yuder let out a faint moan while looking at Kishiar's perfectly straight nose, pressed firmly against his wet, robust chest. His chest, which initially felt almost numb, now seemed to transform into an entirely different organ just by the touch of Kishiars breath. His nipples, continuously stimulated by Kishiar, had completely lost their initial pale color.

Kishiar repeatedly crushed and licked them with his tongue. Focused on those sultry movements, Yuder inadvertently let out a

breath. Just then, a finger slipped into the gap between his buttocks. Yuder stifled a short moan, bit his lip, and soon relaxed his furrowed eyebrows.

“Ah.”

Despite not using any lubricant this time, the invading presence did not feel difficult to accommodate. It wasnt just his front that had gotten wet during the climax.

The sound of something sticky echoed every time the welcoming fingers brushed against the inside. It was an indescribably strange sound, but Yuder didn’t find it embarrassing. As more fingers entered, the sound grew louder, but what mattered more to him was the presence of Kishiar, who had lost all laughter and was entirely focused on him.

By the time more than three fingers began to explore inside, he felt a tight sensation from the widely stretched interior. The pressure was so immense that it was hard to believe it wasn’t from a male organ. However, holding Kishiar’s, Yuder knew how much bigger the real thing was, and he was certain this wasn’t the end.

“Does it hurt?”

“It’s fine,” Yuder replied.

Far from pain, the unusually long fingers intertwined and moved, causing a sharp sensation in an unknown place, making it hard for him to hold back his moans. There was a sensitive spot deep within him that he wasn’t aware of. It usually lay dormant, but in front of Kishiar, it swelled immensely every time it was touched.

Suppressing his moans, Yuder responded, and Kishiar exhaled deeply. Realizing that it was Kishiar’s way of controlling himself, Yuder spread his legs wider and wrapped them around his waist before Kishiar could take another breath.

“Yuder?”

“Don’t think of anything else,” Yuder whispered.

He tightened his grip, and their bodies came even closer, sending shivers down their spines from the intense stimulation.

“Ah…”

Their mutual moans were swallowed as their lips met in a desperate kiss.

Yuder felt even more intoxicated than when he had drunk Quelochet. Perhaps the real feeling of intoxication was closer to this.

He felt Kishiar’s fingers slide out from within him. The sensation of emptiness was both familiar and strange. The man, with his hand wet from Yuder’s fluids, moistened himself and finally positioned himself at the entrance.

Biting his lip, Yuder relaxed his lower abdomen as much as he could.

“Ah…”

He couldn’t believe that something of that size could enter him. Even though he was fully prepared, he felt like he was on the verge of tearing. Kishiar filled him completely. Overwhelmed by the intense sensation, Yuder tightly gripped Kishiar’s shoulders. He felt sweat dripping from his forehead and back.

“Ah…”

Kishiar paused when he was halfway in, giving Yuder time to adjust. Even then, Yuder felt completely full.

Once Yuder’s breathing steadied, Kishiar began to move slowly. Even the slightest movement made Yuder gasp, and his body

screamed in pleasure.

Yuder moaned softly, instinctively moving with Kishiar. Every time their bodies rubbed against each other, he felt the muscles in Kishiar’s lean body tense. In front of Kishiar’s genuine reactions, Yuder felt an exhilarating and wild sensation.

It didn’t matter that this place was an office, where no one could enter without knocking, or that sound could leak out. The overwhelming desire to make the beautiful being before him his own agitated his senses, tightened his body, and involuntarily brought a smile to his face.

Had it always been like this? Wasn’t it strange that despite doing it multiple times, each time felt like a new surge of pleasure? Such thoughts fleetingly crossed his mind, but they were quickly submerged, washed away by the tide of sensation.

Yuder was thoroughly engrossed, clinging to him as if wanting to explore not only the depths within but go even deeper. Their intertwined bodies shook and jerked increasingly faster. In his hazy mind, nameless emotions circled and disappeared in repetition.

In those indescribable sensations, beyond the simple expressions of “feeling good” or “feeling bad,” Yuder saw an illusion. A thin thread-like something seemed to waver between himself and the man entangled with him. That something existed in Kishiar’s red eyes.

A single thread. No, two threads.

No, perhaps a bit more than that…

For a moment, it felt as if all the internal barriers had opened up, making a flinching sound.

His vision turned white…

When he came to his senses, he found that the sun streaming into the office was almost set.

“…Did I fall asleep?”

“Just for a moment,” the man replied softly, holding Yuder’s naked body tightly against his own. It was then that Yuder noticed the bite marks on his skin. Judging by the clear impression of teeth, it must have hurt, but Kishiar looked utterly calm.

“…We should get going soon.”

“Yes, we should.”

But neither of them moved, a first for feeling so reluctant despite knowing something must be done immediately.

“You seemed a bit more sensitive than usual today. Any idea why?”

The scent was stronger than before, too. The man murmured, rubbing Yuder’s back, locking eyes with him. Though the glance seemed light and weightless, Yuder knew it was anything but.

“No.”

“Then it must be because some time has passed since your second gender manifested.”

This was unexpected. Yuder blinked slowly, pausing before speaking.

“It’s not my heat cycle yet.”

If he had to be reminded of the time that had passed since his second gender had manifested, there was only one reason.

“Right. It’s not yet. But it’s not something that will never come,” Kishiar softly replied, embracing him. A feather-light kiss touched and left his temple.

“It won’t hurt to be prepared for anything, especially since you’re somewhat insensitive to your own body.”

This would be the first time since the manifestation. Kishiar probably just meant what he said, but for Yuder, who had not even experienced a single proper heat cycle from his previous life, excluding the week he couldn’t remember at the time of manifestation, the words felt both unfamiliar and heavy.

“True enough…”

In this lifetime too, the heat had come as soon as he awakened his powers. But he hadn’t felt a thing, having slept it off after taking painkillers. Although the frequency of the heat cycles varied for each Awakener with a second gender, enough time had passed that, by Kishiar’s account, something should be on the horizon. Yet for someone who had never experienced it, the concept of his own heat cycle felt awkward, as if he were hearing tales of something that didn’t even exist.

Yuder suddenly realized that he had never seriously thought about his heat cycles or symptoms since his awakening.

Certainly… I’ve been feeling a bit off lately, so it wouldn’t hurt to keep that in mind.

The sensations he had just felt while entwined with Kishiar were undeniable, and he had reached his peak far too quickly. Perhaps his unquenchable heat wasn’t solely due to his desire for Kishiar.

“I hadn’t considered it, but I will keep it in mind.”

“Good.”

Kishiar smiled, as if to say that was enough.

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After that, Yuder unknowingly dozed off again. By the time he jolted awake, unaware that he had even fallen asleep, Kishiar had already taken care of all the aftermath. He didn't know how it had been done, but his body was clean, and apart from a lingering sensation between his legs that felt like they were still slightly spread apart, everything felt incredibly soft.

The only remaining evidence of what they had done here was a sofa whose cushions had irreparably sunk into the floor. The intact sofa across from it, which looked like its twin, only highlighted the damaged one's pitiful state.

"The frame is sturdy, so that should be fine, but I think the cushion will be difficult to repair. I'll have it replaced by the end of the day, so don't worry about it."

"Yes."

Yuder hoped that Nathan Zuckerman would not be the one to handle the replacement, but what could be done? What had happened had already happened.

Late as it was, Yuder resolved to restrain himself from losing control around Kishiar in the office from then on. However, that resolution dissolved like sand before a wave when confronted with the man's vibrant cheerfulness as he handed over a fresh uniform and gloves, saying they would be leaving soon.

Though they had spent hours entangled on the sofa, Kishiar looked as fresh as ever. Naturally, considering that he was someone with whom Yuder could easily spend the entire night, his stamina was truly impressive.

“By the way When did you prepare these new clothes?”

“After the vacation.”

Kishiar responded as if it were obvious, flashing a playful smile.

“I kept an extra set ready in case something like today happened. If you find it difficult to dress yourself, just say so, and I’ll help.”

“I can dress myself.”

Yuder declined and put on the clothes himself. Once fully dressed, Kishiar looked at him with satisfied eyes.

“I had them tailored to your height, so as expected, you look even more elegant. Is it more comfortable than before?”

Is it? Yuder furrowed his brows, looking at the sleeves of his new uniform. Although it did feel a bit more comfortable in terms of movement, the whole notion of “looking elegant” still felt like a foreign concept to him.

“Um yes, it seems so.”

“You look like you wouldn’t know the difference as long as you can wear it.”

“I never said that much.”

At that, Kishiar burst into laughter. Hearing it, Yuder suddenly felt an overwhelming, tender, and loving sensation flood into his chest.

It was something unfamiliar, permeating through his skin and mind as if in resonance.

It was Kishiar’s emotion, conveyed more vividly than ever before.

What did he look like in Kishiar’s eyes? He hadn’t said anything that should elicit such a gentle emotion, yet for the first time, he was curious.

As dusk fell, they arrived at the Sun Palace, where they were greeted just as before by the white-haired chief steward.

“Welcome. I trust your hasty journey was without inconvenience?”

“No inconvenience at all. His Majesty has finally given his permission, so what could possibly be inconvenient?”

Kishiar’s cheerful answer seemed to relax the steward’s brow a bit. His gaze then shifted to Yuder, who was standing behind Kishiar.

“I’ve heard that you’ve been granted the title of Baron. Congratulations.”

There was no sign of discomfort in his elegant and formal tone. Yuder silently bowed his head in acknowledgment.

“Thank you.”

“Her Majesty the Empress is also waiting for the both of you today. Shall we go?”

The Empress, who had miraculously swayed the heart of the once relentless Emperor, arrived early at the Sun Palace. She sat at the spot nearest to the entrance of the second palace, waiting for them.

“Welcome, Duke. And… Yuder.”

She gave a small smile in Yuder’s direction. However, that smile quickly faded, obscured by her deep, thoughtful gaze.

“I assume you have heard. His Majesty has granted permission for you to assess the current condition of the vessel. However, discussions regarding the healing are strictly forbidden.”

This was something they had already heard on the way. After Yuder had responded that he would be cautious, Kishiar interjected with a sly smile.

“Will Her Majesty be accompanying us throughout this process?”

“No. I plan to wait in another room nearby. While I certainly would like to see it for myself, I doubt His Majesty would approve.”

Kishiar seemed to easily guess why she had come all this way despite that.

“Understood. Once we are done, we will meet with Her Majesty again.”

“I would be most grateful if you do.”

“Your Grace, Duke Peletta. His Majesty has informed us that he is ready.”

At that moment, the chief steward who had disappeared earlier reappeared to signal that the time had come. The Empress also stood up, glancing at Kishiar with a look that said, ‘Dont forget our agreement,’ before firmly grasping Yuders hand.

Her slender fingers trembled, but so subtly that only someone in contact with them could tell.

“…Yuder.”

Though the grip was neither painful nor imposing, it felt oddly powerful.

“The only help I can offer you is this. I sincerely pray that you will perform the same astonishing miracle for His Majesty that you did that day.”

””

Yuder looked down at her hand gripping his, then met her eyes and nodded.

“…Yes. I will honor the faith you have placed in me.”

Emperor Keilusa was in the very bedroom-cum-office where he had visited to receive treatment after retrieving the Red Stone mediums some time ago.

Although the room was still small and modest for a place where an Emperor resided, filled with clutter, it all looked different now, given he was managing affairs even while ill.

The only changes in the room were chunks of Red Stone mediums, filled with power and placed in a basket on the desk, and the Emperor, who looked a little more frail than he had a few days ago.

“You’re here. Were not meeting to engage in elaborate formalities right now. Lets keep the greetings as brief as possible.”

From the beginning, the Emperor declared that he would not stand on ceremony, unlike their last meal together. His eyes swept over the faces of Kishiar and Yuder, who had knelt and offered brief salutations. After gazing at Yuder for quite some time, the last look he gave was to his younger sibling, who was smiling innocuously.

“But, Duke, what happened to your neck that you had to seek treatment? Did you sustain an injury that even divine power could not heal?”

Yuder silently swallowed the breath he almost let slip.

‘I knew this would happen.’

The Emperor had pointed to the few pieces of gauze that covered Kishiar’s neck, where naturally, the imprints of Yuder’s fangs were visible. Although he possessed magic power, Kishiar had deliberately chosen not to heal the marks. Instead, he placed a small piece of gauze over them and tied a brightly patterned, wide ornamental tie to cover the red marks.

Neither the chief steward nor the Empress spoke, so Kishiar had hoped he might escape detection. But the Emperors keen eyes were not so easily fooled.

“Quite the opposite. I left it be precisely because it’s not a severe injury,” Kishiar calmly responded, whether he was aware of Yuder’s feelings or not.

“Some wounds can even become a point of pride,” he continued.

“So, you’re saying youve left the marks on your neck because they are a point of pride for the Duke?” the Emperor inquired.

“Yes.”

The atmosphere became tense. The Emperor looked intently at Kishiars face as if he desperately wanted to say something, then slowly shifted his gaze to Yuder. Yuder quickly lowered his head to avoid the Emperors probing eyes.

After a moment of silence, the Emperor relented. “Fine. If you’re well, stand up and come over here.”

The Emperor put on his glasses, looking suddenly tired, and gestured. Without a word, the chief steward, who had been standing rigidly nearby, poured tea into three cups.

The atmosphere was somewhat more relaxed than it had been at their first meeting. Eating and drinking in the Emperor’s presence no longer felt as awkward.

“The reason I’ve summoned you today is that I’ve heard the opinions of those around me suggesting it would be unfair to dismiss your abilities without seeing them for myself. They say that your mere observation of a person’s condition can bring about miracles, almost like ancient magic.”

Everyone in the room knew who that “opinion” came from, but the Emperor neither uttered the Empress’s name nor elaborated on why he had changed his mind. Yet when he mentioned “the opinion of those around me,” his eyes momentarily took on a different weighta pained look that could not completely conceal a tender and warm emotion.

It was an emotion that would have remained hidden if they had not been sitting so closeThe true feelings of Emperor Keilusa.

“If you can indeed do as they say, without causing any harm, then I am willing to give you this one chance,” the Emperor stated, but with conditions. Kishiar was not to intervene, and should the Emperor decide to stop, Yuder would have to cease his observations immediately. When asked if he was willing to agree to these terms, Yuder responded without hesitation.

“Yes, of course.”

Emperor Keilusa’s eyes narrowed for a moment. A soft sigh, almost inaudible, escaped from his pale lips.

“Why did it have to be like this,” he muttered, almost to himself.

“Pardon?”

“Never mind. Let’s begin.”

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A minor disturbance momentarily irked him, but the issue at hand was far more critical.

“Understood.”

Yuder requested the Emperor to lie down, maintaining as composed a state of mind as possible. The Emperor, who had barely touched his teacup, got up without a word and headed towards the bed located not too far away. A brief wobble, like a sudden onset of dizziness, occurred as he started to undress, but thanks to the skillful assistance from his chief steward and Kishiar, no unfortunate fall took place.

“…Is it done now?”

“Yes.”

The Emperor, who had laboriously lain down, only managed to ask the question in a lifeless tone after taking several deep breaths. Yuder approached the bed respectfully and examined the Emperor’s whole body.

‘He really looks frail up close.’

Emperor Keilusa, when confronting others or appearing before them, always managed to maintain a calm and dignified gaze from behind his glasses. One wouldn’t have assumed he was suffering at all. However, lying down and fully exposed, he looked utterly drained and feeble.

Yuder found himself recalling the Kishiar from his past life.

Had that Kishiar also ever appeared this frail when out of the public eye?

He couldn’t know for certain, but the thought made him feel somewhat suffocated.

“And now, what do you intend to do in this condition?”

Snapped out of his reverie by Emperor Keilusa’s question, Yuder abandoned his musings.

“I intend to use the pure power of the Red Stone to examine your internal state.”

Yuder briefly explained what he meant by ‘examining the internal state.’ The Emperor, possibly already informed by the Empress, simply nodded without further questions.

“You will likely feel no pain, only the sensation of being touched. However, should you experience any discomfort, please speak up immediately.”

Yuder removed his gloves and lightly placed his hand on the upper abdomen of the Emperor. He felt the keen gaze of the Emperor and the chief attendant descending upon his hand. In contrast to their somewhat tense emotions facing the unprecedented event, only one person could not take his eyes off Yuder’s face. Naturally, it was Kishiar.

As their eyes met, Yuder felt the unnecessary tension draining away from his hand instantly.

As if waiting for that moment, a faint breeze blew, causing the semi-transparent cloth hovering above the bed to quiver. It was a phenomenon he had experienced several times, associated with the activation of the Red Stone’s power. The dark red veins on the back

of Yuder’s hand writhed and shone, followed by the manifestation of an ethereal force tinged red.

The moment was marked by a golden light beginning to flow from one of Yuder’s pupils.

“My goodness…”

Even the seasoned chief attendant couldn’t suppress his astonishment and murmured involuntarily. However, Yuder was so focused that he couldn’t hear the chief attendant’s mutterings.

‘All those I’ve examined internally so far were Awakeners, and they were in no life-threatening condition. However, the Emperor is not an Awakener. His vessel is even unstable, so I must exercise utmost caution.’

Opening Kishiar had felt like pushing a heavy, solid iron door, but opening the Emperor felt like gingerly opening a rotten wooden door that could collapse at the slightest touch.

Yuder exerted more effort than ever to seize the origin of the troublesome currents flowing within the Emperor’s body. However, capturing those frail streams with a force that already proved challenging to manage was no easy tasktoo much pressure could shatter them.

As he intensified his focus, sweat began to bead on his forehead. The erratic, dark-red blotches in the back of his hand swelled, growing large enough to be seen creeping up his arm and into the collar of his shirt.

Though the light and wind fluctuated irregularly, there was no visible change in Emperor Keilusa. The chief attendant finally broke the tense silence, “It seems to be taking quite some time… Is this typical?”

“It does seem to be the longest it’s ever taken,” Kishiar, who was observing the situation, replied. His voice was even, but his eyes were almost unblinkingly fixed on Yuder.

“So it’s still not working?” Emperor Keilusa mumbled. His eyes were directed at Yuder Aile, who remained intently focused on harnessing the energy.

The Emperor was not terribly disappointed. He had given this final opportunity simply because a cursory examination was possible, but he had never truly harbored expectations of success.

Having had no expectations, there was nothing to be startled by. In fact, he was somewhat relieved not to have given anyone false hope.

After waiting a bit longer with no signs of change, the Emperor turned to Yuder, “If it hasn’t worked by now, there seems to be no point in continuing.”

“…”

“Shall we stop now?”

“…”

“Do you need more time? At this rate, even the Baron’s face will be marred by those blotches. It might be better to stop before it becomes dangerous.”

The Emperor himself felt nothing, so it didnt matter to him whether the attempt was abandoned. However, seeing what looked like real-time damage on a promising talent who could be the pillar of his country in the future was not good on multiple frontsboth for the future of the Orr Empire, after Keilusa La Orrs disappearance, and, although he didn’t want to admit it, for his own brother.

Just as the Emperor was about to call off the endeavor, “Yes. I need more time. Please” Yuder raised his head, speaking in a very suppressed voice.

“Just wait a little longer.”

Yuders eyes, glaring through gritted teeth, were alarmingly red and swollen. The moment he opened his mouth, the dark-red streaks reached up to his jaw and writhed, causing the Emperor to momentarily flinch. He was immediately surprised at his own reaction.

Nothing about this situation had been anticipated by the Emperor.

‘Why?’

Why was he going to such lengths?

When Yuder Aile had initially said he wanted to help the Emperor, he had highly valued Yuder’s steady and calm temperament but had not given much importance to the sincerity behind those words. That had remained true up until this very moment.

Though he appreciated Yuders willingness to help, he could not fathom why it needed to be so desperate.

He had assumed that Yuder would step back readily after a reasonable effort. Given his stoic demeanor in front of the Emperor, he had been viewed as a very rational individual, and his limited emotional range had led to that judgment.

However, the look in Yuder’s eyes felt both familiar and entirely different at the same time. It wasn’t mere loyalty or a desire to impress that filled his gaze; something altogether different, a form of blind conviction, dwelled within his eyes.

Caught off guard, the Emperor found himself asking, “How strange. Why go to such lengths? I’ve said that I’m fine.”

The light emanating from Yuder’s hand intensified. Amidst the wind that tousled even the Emperor’s hair, a slow, flat, and almost inaudible voice could be heard.

“There’s only one reason.”

“…”

“Because I know what will happen next if we stop and give up here.”

Between the reddish streaks that flushed his cheeks, Yuder’s eyes whispered like thunder, no, like an enigmatic prophecy.

“I know Your Majesty must move beyond today. I will make sure that happens.”

Even as he found the words strange, the Emperor couldn’t tear his gaze away. The overwhelming conviction in Yuder’s words moved himshaking for the first time his heart and determination, which had never wavered despite hearing countless expressions of concern.

And as if that small crack served as some kind of trigger, the light flowing from Yuder’s hands suddenly amplified explosively.

“Ah…”

The Emperor felt something warm gently infiltrate his body. Just as he frowned at the unfamiliar sensation and looked away, his eyes met Kishiar’s. Kishiar, who had been watching the whole scene with folded arms, bore a complex expressionpart pleased, part enshrouded in incomprehensible questions. It was a face even the Emperor had never seen before.

“Finally!”

Sensing a crack in the armor of Emperor Keilusa, Yuder instinctively focused his energy anew. The task remained as difficult as before, but the presence or absence of a weakness made a world of difference. Relying on his recent experience of using his powers on Hosannawho had lacked both will and consciousnesshe managed to successfully break through.

There will be no next chance if I fail here.

Whether Emperor Keilusa himself felt that way or not, Yuder knew he was a person who could not die here.

As if responding to its master’s will, the light flowing from Yuder’s hands strengthened, and the wind blew harder. In this tremendous spectacle, as if conjured by ancient magic, the moment the Emperor licked his dry lips, the light that had infiltrated his body expanded sharply and burst out again.

Everyone was rendered speechless at the sight, which looked like a painting drawn with light.

“Success.”

Finally seeing the internal state of Emperor Keilusa that lay before him, Yuder wiped the sweat trickling down his forehead.

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“Success at last.”

Yuder wiped the sweat trickling down his forehead as he finally laid eyes on the internal state of Emperor Keilusa.

Only when the acute tension that had been hovering sharply began to wane did he become keenly aware of his surroundings. Turning his gaze, he caught sight of Kishiar’s red eyes watching him intently from a little distance away.

Unspoken but palpable concern and careful observation.

Though Kishiar refrained from uttering words of excessive worry considering the situation, Yuder knew that if he felt Yuder was struggling to bear some pain, Kishiar wouldn’t hesitate to interveneregardless of the Emperor’s command or Yuder’s own stubbornness.

Oddly enough, just feeling that watchful gaze seemed to provide a solid foundation behind him. Yuder took a deep breath and turned his eyes back to the Emperor.

“The internal gate is open, Your Majesty. Is everything alright?”

“The sensation is a bit odd. But otherwise, everything is as usual.”

“Shall we continue, then?”

Emperor Keilusa’s head moved almost imperceptibly, signaling assent.

Finally allowed to view the Emperor’s inner workings, it wasas expecteda mess.

The energies within the Emperor were fewer and more scattered than those within Kishiar. There was no aura to speak of, and magic energy existed only in a slight concentration around the heart. The most significant aspect was the transparent white light of divine energy.

The spectacle of the divine energy coursing erratically throughout his body, getting tangled and broken intermittently, was evidently not normal even at first glance.

‘And the vessel is…’

Yuder’s eyes scanned the area around the Emperor’s vital point. Thanks to his previous attempts, he quickly found the ‘vessel’ amid the complex flow of light.

Located roughly in the body’s center was a small lump of energy, connected like the root of all power, extending its branches. This was the vessel.

However, Emperor Keilusa’s vessel seemed unstable, as if it might vanish at any moment. Yuder had little trouble guessing why.

The largest power filling the Emperor’s vessel was divine energy. But as this divine energy tried to return to the vessel, it got tangled and dissipated on the way, resulting in very little actually reaching its destination. The vessel lost its form as it lacked the energy to sustain it, causing the chaotic energies in the body to collide and tangle with each other. It was a vicious cycle.

Kishiar’s vessel had been different. It was stable due to the red energy that wrapped around it, allowing the energy to circulate throughout his body healthily. There were some tangles and knots, but compared to the Emperor’s state, it was far more stable.

‘I never thought I would reevaluate Kishiar’s vessel like this,’ Yuder mused, looking down somewhat bitterly at the Emperor’s vessel, which was barely the size of a small bird’s egg.

‘The most serious issue seems to be that it can’t maintain its form and keeps dispersing. This must be what they call “a crack in the vessel”.’

As far as Yuder could tell, the small size of the vessel wasn’t a significant issue. After all, most people live and die without even knowing what a ‘vessel’ is.

However, the inherent problem that anyone could see was that what originally existed was struggling to maintain its proper form and was on the verge of collapsing. Each time the vessel wobbled and barely coalesced back into shape, a corresponding strain appeared on Emperor Keilusa’s brow.

‘Would it have had a similar effect if the Emperor became an Awakener, like Kishiar speculated?’

The vessel of Kishiar and the vessel of the Emperor. The most significant difference between the two was the presence or absence of a red energy that enveloped them, maintaining their shape. If it had existed, the current situation could have been somewhat different.

Yuder’s gaze swiftly moved, focusing on the Emperor’s desk far away. He sensed a faint but familiar power from the mediums stacked in the basket.

They were gifts sent by Kishiar to the Emperor, following the speculation that exposure to Awakener’s energy increases the likelihood of awakening. However, the Emperor had not yet awakened.

‘Naturally, not everyone has awakened since the Red Stone fell. There must be individual differences. But… what conditions give rise to those differences?’

Lost in thought, Yuder suddenly saw a faint red light flicker and disappear within the Emperor’s vessel.

‘…What?’

Blinking, he looked again, but the light had vanished.

‘An illusion?’

However, moments later, Yuder once more saw a red energy briefly shimmer and disappear within the Emperor. This time, he was certain it was not an illusion.

‘This… could be.’

“Your Majesty, you’re sweating profusely on your forehead. Are you alright?”

At that moment, the chief attendant’s cautious words alerted Yuder to the deteriorating state of the Emperor. When he came to his senses, he realized quite a bit of time had passed.

“…I’m fine. It’s business as usual. The Baron’s work is not yet done; leave me.”

Emperor Keilusa replied tersely, his teeth gritted. While his voice feigned calm, his vessel, writhing and revealing its strain, exposed the pain he was feeling.

But still…”

I’ve examined all that I can. Let me quickly discuss the important points and then I’ll withdraw my energy.

Swiftly responding, Yuder moved his hand to point at several locations.

“This is your divine power, this is your magic power, and this central part is your vessel.”

“The vessel, you say? This?”

Yuder elaborated as clearly as possible on the state of the Emperor’s vessel, comparing it with what he had seen in Kishiar and others. Although the explanation was challenging, the Emperor maintained his focus, listening intently even amidst his pain.

“…I see. The Duke’s vessel is wrapped in the energy of an Awakener, while I lack that, and so my collapsing vessel fails to maintain its form… That is your assessment of my current state?”

“Yes, Your Majesty.”

“It’s evident then that becoming an Awakener has indeed made the Duke healthier.”

The Emperor muttered softly and exhaled deeply, closing his eyes. When he reopened them, his face bore a warm affection for Kishiar, mixed with an unfamiliar emotion.

It was a fragile but genuine glimmer of hope.

In the now softer atmosphere, Yuder quietly opened his mouth.

“I’ve explained all that I can, and I’ll now withdraw my energy before continuing.”

Yuder slowly pulled back his energy. As the light hovering above the Emperor dissipated, the chief attendant quickly prepared a warm towel to wipe the fatigued Emperor’s forehead and face.

Yuder was also rapidly growing fatigued, but explaining what he had just discovered about the Emperor took precedence.

“Your Majesty, when I examined your internal state just now, I discovered an aspect that was completely unexpected.”

“…Unexpected?”

“Within you, Your Majesty, there was a red aura.”

“What did you say?”

Emperor Keilusa’s eyes widened in surprise. The chief attendant, who had been attending to the Emperor, abruptly stopped and swallowed hard. Kishiar also revealed a change in emotion, subtly moving his eyebrows.

“Is this true?”

“It appeared only briefly before vanishing, but it was unmistakably a red aura.”

“How could that be… In that case…”

“However, I cannot confirm that it’s the aura of an Awakener.”

At Yuder’s subsequent words, the Emperor’s expression changed again.

Seeming to question what exactly Yuder was trying to say, Yuder opened his mouth without hesitation.

“In my judgment, it’s difficult to find the answer with just the power I possess. Therefore, I would like to seek the help of the Commander.”

“Are you asking for the lifting of the Duke’s participation ban?”

Yuder nodded after a moment of silence.

“Yes. Moreover, I would like to request another opportunity.”

“…”

It was a truly bold request. In the silence that filled the room, Yuder continued unequivocally.

“The extent of what I could examine alone today has its limits. However, if you judge that the results were not useless, please grant me one more opportunity. The power that the Commander possesses is absolutely necessary for this matter.”

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“…”

“Hmm. As I’ve said before, I’m more than willing to assist in any way I can,” Kishiar, who was standing beside Emperor Keilusa, interjected smoothly with a voice tinged with amusement. “However, it would be more helpful if you specify exactly what you would like me to assist with.”

“You make a valid point,” the chief attendant chimed in from the sidelines. His eyes had significantly changed when he looked at Yuder after witnessing the astonishing spectacle that had just unfolded.

Although he intellectually understood that the young man with black hair possessed incredible abilities, the power he had just seen was enough to make him doubt what he thought he knew. It was a revelation even to the old man, who thought he had seen it all after a lifetime in the palace.

The old man, who hadn’t had high expectations for the day, was now awaiting Yuder’s response with a completely changed mindset.

“What I seek from you, Commander, is solely your Awakener ability,” Yuder began, speaking slowly but clearly.

“Your power is exceptionally effective at either pulling something towards you or pushing it away. It is not only applicable to tangible objects but also to intangible energies, making it a rather special ability. I believe that with your help, I can sift through the dispersed energies within His Majesty and gather only the red energy.”

“…”

“If the nature of this gathered energy turns out to be what I suspect it is…”

Yuder’s voice trailed off, and his eyes looked downward as he was lost in thought. He then spoke with greater conviction, emphasizing each word.

“Then perhaps we can find a way to hasten His Majesty’s awakening or protect his vessel.”

The moment Yuder finished speaking, the chief attendant swallowed his breath, and a bright smile lit up Kishiar’s face. The intention was not to chide himself for finally uttering what they had decided not to discuss regarding the treatment.

It was a smile of admiration for someone who had found a new path in what was considered an impassable wasteland, paving the way for all to see.

The Emperor exhaled deeply as he saw the unfolding events that he should have cautiously dismissed.

Up until now, neither the Emperor nor those around him had taken Kishiar’s Awakener abilities too seriously, beyond the fact that they had saved his life. One reason was that Kishiar already had other astonishing abilities, and another was that Kishiar did not use his power in front of his family and relatives.

The ability to pull or push something might sound less impressive when put into words. However, the Kishiar that emerged through Yuder’s description, and the power he wielded, seemed irreplaceably strong.

No, at least Yuder seemed to genuinely believe that Kishiar could accomplish the tasks he described using that power.

Words that seemed so fantastical they bordered on delusion.

But the Emperor had already witnessed something miraculous with his own eyes.

Once his heart had been swayed, there was no turning back.

I couldn’t help but wonder if I was being overly optimistic about the situation… But yes, I must admit, if it’s feasible, nothing could be better.”

At the Emperor’s cautious response, Yuder’s head snapped up.

“In that case…”

“Before that, there’s something I’d like to ask.”

“What would that be?”

“Can you assure me that Duke Peletta and the Baron will not be at risk in this process? I mean, can you swear in front of me that no harm, physical or emotional, will come to you two even if you two take on this task?”

Before Yuder could respond to the Emperor’s sharp and heavy question, Kishiar interjected.

“Your Majesty, if a vow is what you require, then I shall make it.”

“I did not ask you, Kishiar.”

The Emperor replied without a hint of emotion.

“Why not? I am the one who will assist in the task, and I also bear the responsibility for what Yuder is doing.”

“I told you, I didn’t ask you.”

The tension that had briefly peaked dissipated in an instant, thanks to the weary but familiar exchange between them.

Receiving the Emperor’s gaze, Yuder slowly opened his mouth.

“I assure you, the concerns you have will not come to pass. I will stake everything I have and swear it before you, Your Majesty.”

Then, he knelt on one knee and touched his clenched fist to the opposite shoulder, an ancient and truthful gesture of a vow that implied he would consider any form of punishment if he broke it.

The Emperor gazed silently at Yuder for a moment.

“…Very well. I will trust your words.”

Having spoken, the Emperor gave a small cough. When the cough persisted, his attendant quickly lifted him slightly to offer relief, momentarily pausing the conversation.

As he waited for the coughing to subside, Yuder contemplated Emperor Keilusa’s true intentions.

According to the Empress, the Emperor wants Kishiar to become the Crown Prince.

However, if something were to suddenly go wrongdue to hasty action fueled by newfound hopeand the Emperor died prematurely or encountered any issue, then all his plans would be in vain. The same would apply if something happened to Kishiar.

‘Considering that, it’s not surprising if he finds it more comforting to prepare for a future he can somewhat control and anticipate.’

Although it reminded him of Kishiar in his previous life, always putting the future before his own well-being, the Emperor ultimately sided with Yuder.

“I will grant the Baron’s request and give both men another chance. However, I am quite fatigued now… Let’s conclude for

today.”

Finally hearing the response he had hoped for from the Emperor, Yuder felt a tingling sensation run down his spine. The weight of the trust the Emperor had granted him pressed down on his shoulders, differently from when he had trusted Kishiar.

“Thank you, Your Majesty.”

It was a monumental act of courage and also the beginning of an enormous change.

Something that had never happened before was about to unfold, a future whose end no one could predict was now on the horizon.

“…So, His Majesty has changed his mind.”

“Is it really true?”

Leaving the Emperor’s chamber, Kishiar and Yuder headed straight to where the Empress was waiting. Despite the late hour, the Empress, who had been standing all along, collapsed into a chair as soon as she heard the news that the Emperor had changed his mind.

“Did His Majesty truly say that?”

“Yes, it’s true.”

“Ah….”

After repeatedly confirming the matter, a soft sigh tinged with a moan escaped the Empress. The chief maid beside her quietly lifted a handkerchief. The Empress buried her face in it and did not raise her head for a considerable time.

When she finally looked up again, she grabbed Yuder’s hand first. Her eyes, wet with tears she’d tried but failed to hold back,

continuously conveyed her gratitude to Yuder.

“Thank you. I am truly grateful. I believed you would do it, but now that it’s actually happened…”

Yuder shook his head gently, replying that it was all due to her influencing the Emperor’s heart. However, the Empress’s tears and overwhelming emotions didn’t subside easily. It was only when Kishiar stepped in and jokingly told the Empress, “I wanted to share the joy and hold the assistant’s hand as well, but it seems you’ve beaten me to it,” that the atmosphere finally began to calm.

“I’ve shown an unsightly side of myself. I apologize. My emotions got the better of me… Come to think of it, Yuder, are you alright? You look extremely fatigued; perhaps I’ve held you here for too long.”

“I am fine.”

The dark flush that had risen to Yuder’s cheeks had by then receded somewhat, settling below the collar of his garment. Although he couldn’t completely hide his fatigue, Yuder didn’t seem to mind.

“If there’s anything I can do to help you in the future, I will. You must be tired today, go and get some rest.”

The Empress informed them that Kishiar had made arrangements for them to stay at a palace he had resided in during his days as the prince, while they were checking on the Emperor’s condition. As Kishiar had predicted earlier, it seemed they would be staying at the imperial palace that night.

After offering their farewells, Yuder watched the Empress leave with a sense of mixed emotions, pondering anew about her relationship with the Emperor.

The Empress, who had been so anxious yet couldn’t even properly greet the Emperor when face-to-face, was leaving. And the

Emperor, who would only regain some warmth when hearing stories related to the Empress, even amidst his suffering.

‘I must make things different from now on.’

The road ahead was long. As Yuder raised his head and exhaled a deep breath, his eyes met Kishiar’s. Just as he was about to ask where they should go next, a hand reached out and tightly embraced Yuder’s back.

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Yuder had been embraced by Kishiar in various ways before, but this hug was a first. The man who held Yuder so tightly that it was hard to breathe kept his head bowed and his eyes closed for a long time, saying nothing.

In the silence, which was like boiling water without a sound, the thumping of the other's heart reverberated loudly in their ears through their bodies pressed together. Yuder carefully lifted his hand, which had been hanging by his side, and placed it on the other's back.

Finally, as the two became as one like a single tree, Kishiar spoke.

"There are many things I want to say, but no words can fully convey what I'm feeling right now."

""

Thank you.

The emotion felt stronger, flowing through their skin rather than words. Unknowingly, Yuder's fingers twitched in response to the emotion that seemed to resonate from his head to his toes.

He had successfully completed countless missions and accomplished many tasks that were generally considered impossible. Yet he rarely felt any vain emotions like pride or satisfaction. Yuder Aile's longstanding habit and nature were to think calmly about the next, more difficult challenge rather than basking in the satisfaction of what he had done. Even just a moment ago, hadn't he been contemplating the weight of future tasks while watching the Empress's emotions and tears?

So the joy bubbling up from within felt somewhat unfamiliar and awkward to him.

What is this emotion, for something that was just a job that had to be done? The mountain that must be crossed still looms too high and perilous; it's too early to be at ease.

Yet, when he looked at Kishiar, who laid bare his suppressed emotions the moment they were alone, Yuder felt that this couldn't be helped. Unless one is a rock, how could one not feel anything? If the person here wasn't Yuder but someone else, the laughter tinged with various emotions would undoubtedly stir something within them as well.

"Are you alright?"

"As you can see, I'm fine."

"You were badly bruised."

"It wasn't too painful… A bit tiring, but rest will fix it."

"Good… That's a relief."

Indeed, it's a relief. Kishiar softly muttered as he laid his forehead against Yuder's hair, sniffing lightly at the tips before finally letting go.

"Shall we go, then?"

As it turned out, the carriage bound for their palace had been waiting at the back door for some time. The waiting attendants and coachmen led them quietly, showing no surprise at their delayed appearance.

"Please, Your Highness."

Their destination, cloaked in darkness, was a small palace far from the Sun Palace. Aged attendants, whose faces were familiar

from previous meetings, greeted Kishiar and Yuder with bright smiles.

“We heard you would stay after visiting His Majesty; do you require anything for your comfort? Bath and bedroom are ready.”

“Accommodations are set; prepare warm medicinal tea with honey.”

The palace had not changed since their last visit. Yuder came out after taking a shower, having pushed away Kishiar who had wanted to accompany him to the bathroom.

‘I almost forgot where I am, he followed so naturally.’

This wasn’t the Cavalry; this was where Kishiar had once been called Prince. Shouldn’t he maintain at least some formality before attendants who had known Kishiar since childhood?

Yuder sipped the tea that the servants had lovingly prepared, as Kishiar had not yet emerged from the other bathroom. The original bitter taste was smoothly complemented by the sweetness of honey, immediately easing his tension. His stiff muscles momentarily relaxed, and a long breath escaped from him.

That’s the bedroom where I stayed last time, Yuder thought, casting his gaze toward the distant entrance of the chamber. It was the very place where he had woken up for the first time after manifesting his second gender. At that time, he had no concerns, but now, knowing more about Kishiar, the three isolation barriers hidden there began to weigh on his mind.

They were false walls, designed to contain and isolate the overpoweringly strong power of a young prince, so it wouldn’t affect the outside world. Considering Kishiar had likely spent a lot of time within those meticulously crafted barriers, Yuder felt decidedly

dispirited. His mood darkened further when he recalled how Kishiar had once shrugged it off, as if talking about a childhood friend.

“Come to think of it, the place where the Emperor resides now didn’t feel that different from that bedroom.”

Kishiar had mentioned that more of such isolation barriers existed in various palaces within the Imperial compound. Yuder was fairly certain that one of those places was probably in the second palace of the Sun Palace, which served as both the Emperor’s bedroom and office. Things he hadn’t understood before were now coming into view.

”””

Sipping his tea again, which he couldn’t really taste anymore, Yuder looked around to clear his mind. The room where he sat was a private resting area, available only to the palace’s owner. Even though Kishiar wasn’t currently occupying the space, traces of his presence were evident in the furnishings and decorative items, which closely resembled those in his office room.

The space was not overly opulent, but it was intricate and elegant, mirroring the atmosphere of its owner. The paintings adorning the walls were mostly landscapes, capturing a broad spectrum of lights and colors, rather than portraits or still lifes.

“Could it be he likes landscapes because his mobility is restricted?”

“Ah, Lord Yuder, you’re already here,” a servant said as he entered with a tray. Setting down a small plate of cookies and cream, the man, who appeared to be of similar age to Emperor’s chief steward Yuliver, gave a gentle smile.

“Is there something you were looking at? If you require anything, please feel free to ask.”

“I was just looking at the paintings for a moment.”

“Ah, if you’re interested in art, we have a collection that His Highness, the Duke, accumulated while staying here. Would you like to go see it?”

Yuder was about to decline when the servant’s next words made him change his mind.

“One of the portraits that His Highness drew during his stay at the palace is also displayed there. It’s a space that has received endless praise from all who see it.”

“Which way is it?”

Setting down his cup, Yuder rose from his seat. The gallery displaying the artwork was located just next to the corridor beside the room where he had been sitting. It was a practical use of a space that lacked windows and natural light.

It was a beautiful place, but Yuder’s eyes barely lingered on the other paintings and artworks. His focus was on a rather striking portrait.

“This is”

He instantly recognized the boy in the painting. The young man, who captured attention with his golden locks, sat emotionless on a chair.

His cheeks were alabaster, radiant precisely because of their youthful immaturity. Even as a young boy, his well-formed features prevented him from looking completely frail; they were just as they had always been. Although the boy prince in the painting wore no special clothes or jewels, he was so regal and beautiful that he could blind the eye. Somehow, perhaps due to the absence of a smile, he seemed like a fleeting existence.

Never had he thought that he would encounter this face herethe one that Emperor Katchian had burned beyond recognition in his previous life. Memories surfaced of times in Tainu when he'd been curious about what Kishiar's childhood might have been like, and the sensation was deeply strange.

In any case, the young Kishiar in the painting was far more remarkable than Yuder had ever vaguely imagined.

"…That painting was created just before His Highness, the Duke, left for Peletta upon receiving his title. At the time, the court painter, Lord Elmert, prepared the painting. He doubted his own skill and was so tormented that he fainted five times while making it," the servant who had been attending to Yuder explained in a soft voice.

"But in the end, it became a portrait that everyone could admire. Had it been released to the public, it might have been considered Elmert's masterpiece, even more representative than 'Afternoon in the Meadows Palace.'"

"I see."

He didn't know much about the name of the painter, but he clearly understood that the painting depicted Kishiar at the time he had just become the Duke of Peletta.

'So he was even younger than I thought.'

It was a time when one should know nothing of the world's troubles. Yet, not a trace of laughter could be seen in the eyes of the boy in the painting. Was it because he was already aware of the destiny that awaited him, far away?

Yuder stared long and hard into the distant past of Kishiar La Orr he did not know.

He stood almost absorbed in the painting until a chilly fragrance enveloped him.

“So you’re here.”

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Upon hearing the voice tinged with amusement, Yuder turned his head to find Kishiar, whose hair tips were slightly damp, approaching to stand beside him in front of the painting. The attendant had discreetly disappeared from view.

“Hmm. Were you looking at this? It’s been a while.”

“I heard it was painted just before you left for Peletta.”

“That’s right. I had it done because there were many saying I might never return from there. You could say it was something like a portrait meant to be left behind after one’s death.”

Kishiar casually revealed the grim backstory of the painting. However, his expression while looking at it was neither dark nor seemed displeased.

Yuder stared briefly at the face in the portrait, its gentle contours and transient aura entirely gone, replaced by a secretive and lax smile, before responding.

“In that case, it’s become the most useless painting in the world. You’re still here, after all.”

“True.”

Kishiar’s eyes twinkled as if Yuder’s words were the exact answer he’d been expecting. It seemed the painting still being stored here was more a memento of its original purpose being rendered meaningless.

“But since you’ve shown such interest in it, it doesn’t seem entirely useless. Do you like the painting?”

“It’s not so much that I like the painting, but I was curious as I’ve never seen a portrait of you before.”

“So, you were really curious about my younger days.”

Kishiar read Yuder’s intentions with remarkable accuracy, his face brimming with enthusiasm.

“So, what’s your impression?”

Impression. Yuder couldn’t say he’d been contemplating either the fate of this seemingly pointless painting from his previous life or the trials the young Duke in the portrait must have faced after heading for Peletta.

In the end, there was only one thing he could say.

“… I was thinking that you were handsome from that time on.”

Kishiar’s eyes sparkled.

“Is that all you have to say? It’s a bit embarrassing to say it myself, but back then, people would often say I was more like an angel than a human, or that even the air where my breath brushed by was mythically beautiful.”

He didn’t look embarrassed at all; the content of his words even less so.

“It seems you’re already well aware, so what more do you wish to hear?”

“I may be tired of knowing how handsome I am, but special compliments from a special person are always something one wishes to hear more of.”

If anyone other than Kishiar had brazenly made such skin-crawling comments, they might have instantly turned to dust under

Yuder’s hand.

But this was Kishiar. His self-praise about his appearance was convincing enough to make anyone accept it, so all Yuder could do was let out a short sigh.

“Fine. You were, are, and likely will forever continue to be incredibly handsome.”

Kishiar burst into laughter. Fortunately, he seemed satisfied with that much and didn’t press Yuder any further about the beauty of his younger self.

“Then it’s time to infuse you with some divine power. There’s a chair over there; please have a seat.”

“Pardon?”

“If we’d shared the same bathroom, I could have done it while we bathed. Since we didn’t, this is the only option. Now, come on.”

‘…So that’s why he followed me into the bathroom?’

Unlike before, Yuder felt considerably less pain when his body became stained with the energy from the Red Stone, which now seemed to seep between his veins rather than just his skin. The same was true when he was healed with divine power. Although the rate of disappearance of the blemishes didn’t speed up as it had before, the absence of pain alone was an incomparable advantage.

Since his body would gradually recover if he rested, he figured it was okay not to receive divine power. Kishiar, however, appeared to have never intended to leave things be from the start.

Seeing no signs of Kishiar retreating, Yuder eventually opened the flap of his robe in front of the man. Kishiar said nothing for a

moment, looking at the faintly moving, crimson veins that still marred one of Yuder’s shoulders and various spots on his chest.

…

Finally, Kishiar began a familiar ritual in silence, taking out holy water, a sanctified symbol, and a purification stone. Each time the white light of the divine power touched his body, Yuder felt a surge of vitality in his weary flesh and a cooling sensation in the heated areas.

Even though Kishiar knew that his divine power no longer had the potent healing effects it once did, he continued to generously channel his power. Then, he suddenly spoke, Yuder, when do you plan to examine His Majesty again?

The sooner, the better… If possible, I’d like to examine him again tomorrow.

Depending on His Majesty’s health condition, it should be possible. It’s not bad for me either, as I also want to test my strength as soon as possible. However, there’s one thing we need to confirm beforehand.

What is it?

I couldnt properly see the red light you mentioned earlier when His Majesty’s internal condition was open.

Pardon?

Caught off guard by the unexpected comment, Yuder hesitated for a moment. Despite noticing Yuder’s slight flinch, Kishiar continued to channel his divine power without faltering.

Its natural that I might not have seen as much as you did, since you were closer to the source of the energy. However, even His

Majesty and Yuliver, who were even closer, did not see that light. Don't you think thats worth considering? My current hypothesis is that perhaps you were the only one who could see that energy… What do you think?

Yuder was perplexed. He had seen that red light, albeit briefly, but it hadn't been so fleeting as to be mistaken for an illusion. Could it be true that no one else had seen that vivid light?

'I naturally assumed that others would have seen it to some extent since I had seen it twice and was quite certain.'

If they simply missed it because it had passed too quickly, then that was fortunate. However, if only Yuder could see that energy, then it could cause problems when re-examining the Emperor. Especially for Kishiar, who needed to see the target to focus his energy.

If that is indeed the case, then I agree that we should definitely confirm it before we examine His Majesty again, Yuder said.

Good. Do you have any ideas as to the cause?

Yuder thought for a moment before responding, If the reason lies with me, then the most likely explanation could be my eye…

Yuder looked directly into Kishiars red eyes and saw his own reflection. Currently, his eyes were no different from usual as he was not using any abilities. However, when he used his powers, one of Yuders eyes turned golden. This unique phenomenon had been described by Enon as the "Eye of Magic."

When the Eye of Magic opens, one becomes sensitive to phenomena caused by magic power and other energies, seeing things one couldn't see before… or so they say.

Ever since that moment, Yuder had found it much more comfortable to peer into someone's inner self compared to before.

He had grown accustomed to this newfound ease, and given that he didn't feel any significant changes in himself, he hadn't thought much of it. However, if he considered today's incident as an instance of "seeing things he couldn't see before," then this mysterious event made some sense.

Hearing Yuder's speculation, Kishiar also nodded his head softly in agreement.

"My thoughts exactly."

"If I'm the only one who can see that energy, things will get difficult. How can we gather strength if Commander can't see it?"

"In fact, I've been thinking about a solution to that while taking a bath earlier. Would you like to hear it?"

The divine power flowing from Kishiar's hand finally ceased. Confirming that the crimson vein had settled and almost returned to its original size, the man opened his mouth as he draped a garment over Yuder's bare shoulder.

"The source of the magic flowing in your eyes originated from me. And we are also connected through a somewhat mysterious force."

"Yes."

The man who started off with cryptic words studied Yuder's reaction and continued.

"So, if we intentionally activate that connection while attempting something, perhaps I can clearly know what you are seeing and chasing from my end. I had that thought."

…Is that even possible?

Yuder didn’t know much about magic, making it difficult to firmly assert anything. However, he did feel that it wouldn’t be as easy as it sounded.

“Intentional activation… Is that even possible? What if it puts you at risk…?”

“Have you forgotten? We’ve already activated our connection once before through our own will. Considering that, this method might be the most tried and true.”

At those words, Yuder immediately recalled the slender threads of light he had seen overlaying Kishiar earlier today. That dreamlike and mysterious sensation still lingered somewhere within him.

“And I believe the Awakener’s power I possess could also help in activating this connection,” Kishiar added.

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Kishiar's eyes were clear, as if he had considered the idea long before today. Upon hearing his words, Yuder's mind reflexively flashed back to the day in a past life when he had killed Kishiar.

"Do you remember the inexplicable bond I inflicted upon you?"

"Perhaps what was connected that day was something deeper than our physical selves… something akin to a soul. After much searching for a way to sever this unseen link, I concluded that my powers could bring about the most optimal outcome."

"…This will end soon. Pushing until all bonds are forcibly severed… and then…"

Words that had been hard to fully understand when Yuder had dreamt them.

However, if Kishiar could intentionally draw their connection closer with his power, couldn't the opposite also be true?

If two objects that were stuck together were pushed in opposite directions indefinitely, then whatever they were…

"They would certainly sever."

A chill crawled down his spine, and he felt as if every hair on his body stood on end.

A sense of certainty flooded in, confirming what Kishiar in his past life had intended to do. His mind grew icy.

"Did Kishiar succeed back then? What happened next?"

Kishiar in his past life had intended to use his abilities to sever his connection with Yuder as he faced his own end. Assuming that he succeeded, why was it that even after turning back time, a ‘thread’ between him and Yuder still remained?

Had the connection severed as he wished, or had it failed? Had Yuder remained unscathed despite the severance?

“No… I thought so, but that wasn’t the case.”

Yuder recalled the gaps in his memory he had lived unaware of, the countless holes still lurking somewhere within him.

The majority of the memories he had recovered and the gaps he had filled were related to Kishiar. Was this the price he had paid for Kishiar’s attempt to sever their bond?

His head throbbed and ached. The more he tried to think, the more painful it became.

“Yuder?”

Kishiar called out cautiously, observing the icy pallor that had come over Yuder’s face. Yuder finally snapped out of his reverie and looked at Kishiar. The headache vanished as quickly as it had arrived.

“Is there something troubling you in what I’ve said?”

“…No, there isn’t.”

Avoiding Kishiar’s gaze, Yuder hesitated briefly before speaking.

“I see… I’m not certain if the plan you’ve suggested is actually possible, as I hadn’t fully considered it, but it doesn’t seem entirely impossible.”

What Kishiar was attempting now was fundamentally different from what he had tried in his past life. Instead of meddling with the connection itself, he merely intended to ‘draw in’ an already existing but rarely activated connection, making it easier to trigger and utilizing the resulting sensations.

First, let’s see if it’s really possible or not, Yuder thought.

“Would it be difficult to try it out now?”

“Now? Wouldn’t it be better to rest a bit first?”

Knowing that this concern was directed at him, Yuder shook his head gently. He responded that he didn’t want to delay even a little if there was a way. Kishiar looked into his face for a moment before nodding.

Knowing he lacked the power, Yuder tried to keep a neutral expression on his face, like someone hesitating to reveal a secret.

“Let’s try something simple, then.”

Kishiar took Yuder’s hand.

“Use any ability. Just enough to open your Eye of Magic.”

Immediately, Yuder conjured a breeze. As the warm wind brushed against the strands of hair on his forehead, a golden light streamed from his eye, signaling that his Eye of Magic had opened.

‘I don’t see any other powers right now, but…’

Despite the dim lighting, the clarity with which he could see Kishiar’s facial expression and even the number of his eyelashes confirmed the activation of his Eye of Magic. While contemplating this, Kishiar, who had been gazing into his golden eye, gently tightened his grip on Yuder’s hand.

In that instant, the air around them seemed to ripple, and a tingling sensation spread from behind Yuder's eyes. His hand twitched involuntarily.

"When I channel my magic power, there's indeed a reaction."

The light intensified. Though Kishiar whispered it, Yuder couldn't see it, making it hard to believe.

"Now… try using your ability."

A subtle, mist-like energy began to emanate from Kishiar's entire body. Yuder caught every distorted, misty fluctuation, difficult as they were to see. The moment that lingering energy seemed to know where to go, it surged through their clasped hands into Yuder. Yuder inhaled deeply and clenched his teeth.

'…Ah.'

Something had 'touched.'

Somewhere deep within Yuder, something dormant quivered at this sudden contact. Something else followed smoothly, 'pulling' at it. Yuder felt as if his entire being was being sucked towards Kishiar and swayed, feeling momentarily dizzy.

"You're fine."

A soft voice reassured him as the hand gripping his tightened, as if to deny the sensations as unreal.

Yuder took a deep breath and blinked reflexively. Then, in that brief moment, he saw a world turned utterly upside down.

Between him and Kishiar wavered a single familiar thread. That faint, fragile thread, seemingly made of light, looked nearly identical to the one that had once helped Yuder locate Kishiar in Tainu.

He followed the trajectory of that weightless thread fluttering around them. Reaching its end, he realized it was connected to both their clasped hands and Kishiar’s red eyes. He was overwhelmed, unable to speak.

At the same time, the world gradually faded to white.

All he could see was the presence before him. The scent he had surely memorized felt more vivid than ever. Yuder breathed in the comforting fragrance of Kishiar, imbibing unfamiliar yet familiar emotions within that scent.

It was as if from the beginning, everything within Yuder had longed to continue being drawn towards him. The delicate thread encircling his body yearned for a deeper, stronger connection, once lost and now hoped for again.

In a powerful interweaving and entanglement, the fragmented pieces loudly cried out for something.

It was the name of the one who had once been like a part of him. Or perhaps a memory, or maybe regret, or even resentment.

And in response to those intense emotions, he sensed similar yet unfamiliar sensations coming from somewhere invisible that were connected to him. Yuder felt entrapped by these sensations, as if they were violently shaking his soul. He tried to suppress them with force but failed.

When Yuder opened his eyes again, he became aware that he was still in the unchanged gallery. He had been sitting upright, holding Kishiar’s hand while attempting the ritual, but now found himself almost embraced in the man’s arms.

Kishiar’s energy had long since waned, and the wind summoned by Yuder had also dissipated. Finally taking a long breath, the pair of red eyes that had been staring into Yuder’s blinked.

“Commander?”

“We successfully activated the connection. Did you feel it?”

“Ah… yes, I felt it.”

“Any pain or discomfort?”

“None.”

“Good, that’s fortunate.”

Kishiar brushed his hand across Yuder’s forehead. Yuder sat up as if waking from a dream. The lingering fragments of emotion swirling in his head faded quickly, causing him to forget what he had just felt.

“Are you alright, Commander?”

Kishiar explained that the moment the connection was activated, as expected, he had been able to somewhat feel what Yuder’s Eye of Magic was seeing by using his own magic energy.

“I sensed the flow of the Awakener energy and magic energy from me. However, the connection kept unexpectedly strengthening. I couldn’t disconnect it as easily as I had hoped to…”

After saying this much, Kishiar briefly shook his head. Now that Yuder looked, he noticed Kishiar’s gaze was also inexplicably dull and deep.

“…I thought I sensed something immediately after that, but I can’t be sure.”

‘Something…’

Yuder felt similarly. He thought he had sensed something, but the feeling quickly faded as he regained his senses, making it difficult to

put into words.

‘But I have gained one answer.’

It was now certain that with Kishiar’s power, activating the connection was possible. And through that, he could also reach Yuder’s Eye of Magic. It was a significant step forward in the path to healing the Emperor.

Instead of being mired in the unknown, it was better to organize the answers they had found. Yuder lay down in the bedroom, filled with aromatic pouches that the Empress had sent for them, and after pondering for a long while, closed his eyes.

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Chapter 540

Yuder swung his sword in the darkness.

The outdoor training ground of the Cavalry was completely silent, all lights extinguished as night deepened. Lost in his own rapid breathing, Yuder repeatedly swung his sword down, focusing solely on the rhythm of his own breaths and movements.

Suddenly, the sword slipped from his grip and skidded across the ground, momentarily halting the seemingly endless cycle of swings.

Yuder looked down at the practice sword rolling on the ground with a furrowed brow, its clunky noises filling the air. He then glanced at the palm of his hand, which had become an unrecognizable mess of blood and sweat.

Clenching his fist tightly, Yuder took a few steadying breaths and moved on. As he casually bent down to pick up his sword, a pair of unfamiliar feet appeared in his line of sight. It was just then.

Who is it the Commander?

About to ask who it was, Yuder quickly changed his question. The reason was that a face he thought he had never seen before blinked and transformed into a familiar one. Lacking much knowledge about magic, Yuder assumed it was an optical illusion caused by the darkness.

Even in the dead of night, when it was hard to make out faces, that striking visage could not go unrecognized. The man whose face Yuder, infamous for not remembering the names or faces of any of his colleagues, instantly memorized was none other than Duke Kishiar La Orr. With an inscrutable expression, Kishiar spoke.

Have you been practicing with the sword all this time?

Yes. So?

Arent you going to sleep? It’s late.

Coming from the Commander, who himself was wandering around at this hour, the question seemed rather ironic. Judging from Kishiar’s appearanceclad in clearly recognizable outdoor clothing and a fatigued expressionit seemed he had just returned from outside. Seeing a Duke wandering alone at such an hour without even a knight for protection was hardly reassuring.

A young duke who enjoys night-time activities and is terrible at planning. A royal black sheep who assembled a Cavalry for his own amusement.

Yuder recalled the various rumors he had heard about the Commander from other members of the Cavalry and simply bowed his head in response, offering no answer.

I didn’t ask to pry. Your hand looks injured; may I take a look?

Did he notice that in this darkness? Reluctant yet respectful, as the man was his Commander and Yuder had nothing to claim for himself, he hesitantly extended his less-than-perfect hand.

You still kept swinging even in this condition? Impressive.

Whether it was a compliment or a scornful remark, Kishiar looked closely at Yuders face and asked.

Do you enjoy pain?

How could he? Yuder swallowed the retort that nearly escaped his lips.

The man was his Commander. No matter how much of a pariah Yuder might be among the members, he couldn’t afford to talk back to the Commander.

No, Commander.

It seems unlikely that you’d continue such torturous training without seeking medical attention unless you couldnt feel pain or you enjoyed it.

It’s just a blister that burst; it doesnt require any medical treatment.

So, you don’t enjoy pain or have a high pain tolerance?

No, Commander.

It was the first time Yuder had had such a lengthy conversation with the Commander, and with each word exchanged, his exhaustion grew exponentially. Eventually, Yuder pulled out a handkerchief and began to vigorously wipe his hand, as if to demonstrate his irritation. The sensation of roughly scrubbing away the blood mixed with sweat felt uncomfortably hot, but at this point, he didn’t care.

“May I go now?”

“Go ahead.”

The Commander finally gave permission. Yuder wasn’t particularly fond of the unchanging, crimson eyes that had been mocking him earlier.

Are all high-ranking people like this? Yuder thought, feeling abruptly exhausted. He squeezed out every last ounce of courtesy for a polite farewell and turned away. Yet even as he assumed his stance to resume his sword practice, the Commander remained, not leaving his spot.

The Commander’s continual gaze was unnerving, but Yuder deliberately chose not to look back and carried on with his own tasks. It wasn’t until Yuder had completed all the 24 basic sword movements that the observer finally spoke.

“Why is someone capable of using multiple elements so intent on wielding a sword? You should be more than sufficient with the powers you already possess. Wouldn’t it be better to strengthen those?”

Yuder was slightly surprised.

Did the Commander remember who I am?

Since his entrance test, Yuder had been somewhat of a celebrity within the Cavalry for his flashy display of multiple elements. However, as far as the Commander was concerned, Yuder was just another Awakener among the countless commoners. He hadn’t expected the Commander, who hadn’t even attended the entrance test and often vacated his post, to recognize him.

Could it be that this man remembers the faces and abilities of over 300 members?

Feeling a strange mixture of emotions, Yuder responded slowly.

“Training is not about continually repeating what you’re already good at; it’s about improving your weaknesses. I feel the need to improve my swordsmanship, which is lacking compared to others.”

Before joining, Yuder hadn’t expected that everyone in the Cavalry would be taught swordsmanship, no exceptions. In an Empire that considered the sword the noblest of weapons, it didn’t hurt to learn, so Yuder had participated diligently. The problem was that he had never handled a weapon before.

While he had plenty of experience with axes from living in a rural area, he had never used a sword other than kitchen knives and cleavers. Unlike other members who had wielded swords since childhood, Yuder's hands were clumsy with the unfamiliar weapon. Despite his calloused hands, new blisters formed and blood was drawn.

Those who had considered Yuder an unfortunate soul found joy in his struggles. They were probably relieved to see even a terrifying individual like him had weaknesses. However, Yuder felt crushed by their laughter.

That was why he was practicing like a madman, even sacrificing sleep.

"Hmm, impressive."

The word 'impressive' was spoken, but the shadowed, crimson eyes revealed no emotional change.

"But cutting down on sleep and swinging away haphazardly will only get you so far. Training needs specific goals. What's your ultimate aim with this training?"

A specific goal for training. He hadn't thought about that.

Yuder scrunched his brows in thought and finally opened his mouth.

"I plan to continue this way until I can perform the basic sword manual ten times in a row without feeling any discomfort in my hands."

"Ten times?"

"Yes."

“A good goal, but I’m not sure how you’ll accomplish it with your fifth movement being so skewed.”

The Commander walked away with a faint smile, as if suggesting that Yuder’s goal was entirely unfeasible. Yuder watched him go and absentmindedly swung his sword again. He hadn’t noticed before, but it did seem as though the blade swung a little crookedly. With a furrowed brow, Yuder continued to repeat the movement. After days of practice, he finally felt confident that he could execute the fifth technique flawlessly. And then he ran into the Commander again at the training ground under the cover of night.

The man, upon seeing Yuder swinging his sword with zeal, narrowed his eyes and spoke, “The balance on your fourteenth movement is off. Spread your feet a bit more and hold your stance. That should correct it.”

Yuder said nothing.

Such peculiar encounters continued. The Commander would watch Yuder’s movements without doing anything, then offer critical remarks before leaving.

Eventually, what started as a once-a-week encounter became every three days, and then almost every day. By the time Yuder realized this pattern, he had already achieved his goal.

“You’ve accomplished your objective, I see.”

After completing all the sword techniques from the basic manual ten times with perfect form, the Commander suddenly spoke to Yuder. Without a word, Yuder sheathed his practice sword. The Commander could have taken offense at his aloofness, but he didn’t. Surprisingly, he was quite lenient in such matters.

“So, how does it feel to have reached your goal?”

What did it feel like to have achieved one's goal? As ever, the Commander had a knack for posing odd questions.

"What should it feel like?"

"It's easy to swing a sword by the book for a day. But fewer than half can endure a week, and far fewer than that can endure a month. And if someone endures beyond that, there's only one reason."

It was because it was enjoyable. The murmured words penetrated Yuder's ears.

"So, did you find it enjoyable?"

Yuder paused. Enjoyable? Just as he was about to say that he hadn't started this for fun, a sudden realization struck him.

Why had he started this training in the first place?

The sense of rivalry he had initially felt towards others had vanished. All that remained was a peculiar satisfaction in achieving a perfect stance.

As this realization hit him, it felt as though he had been slapped on the head. The corners of the man's lips lifted ever so slightly, tracing a faint curve. It was hard to tell if it was a smile or not, but the moment vanished as quickly as it came. Yet, for some reason, it lingered deeply in Yuder's mind.

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“…”

Yuder silently opened his eyes.

‘Was it a dream?’

He had dreamt of a time from his past lifeone of the earliest moments after he had joined the Cavalry. It was the first time he had had a conversation with Kishiar.

He remembered beginning to learn various things from Kishiar, starting with the sword. Those memories had blurred long ago due to the passage of time. However, the recollections that resurfaced in his dream were incredibly vivid, as if they had occurred just yesterday. Yuder had experienced this sudden clarity of forgotten memories multiple times before.

‘Was that also among the memories I had lost?’

But it seemed unlikely that he would forget something as trivial as that.

The texture of the practice sword that he gripped in his palms, Kishiar’s voice whispering in the dark, and even the slight upward curl of Kishiar’s lipsall appeared in his mind with unsettling clarity.

Yes, there had undoubtedly been such a time.

A time when nobody had died yet, when his second gender hadn’t manifested, and when he was wholly focused on learning new things.

Back then, Yuder had felt that adapting to his radically changed living environment was somewhat against his nature. But looking back, he thought that might have been the most peaceful period of his life.

Yuder rose, feeling as if his chest had become slightly lighter. The fragrant and sharp aroma wafting from the aromatic pouch placed next to his pillow tickled his nose.

Was the Empress's aromatic pouch, said to bring good dreams, the cause of today's dream? Though seeing Kishiar in a vision twice yesterday likely had the most significant influence, the pouch might also have played a role in bringing forth a trivial yet peaceful memory from many.

'If its a good dream, then it's good in its own way.'

Yuder of the past would not have admitted it, but the present Yuder knew that he had been quite enamored with the first sword he had touched. Although he was aimless and unaware of his own limitations back then, training was as close to his true calling as anything could be.

And he had realized that through Kishiar.

Yuder got out of bed and stood on the floor. He was the only one in the room, as his chamber was right next to Kishiar's. As he walked towards the still-dark window, he saw the palace's rear view.

The stunning imperial garden, breathtaking from any angle, failed to stir any emotion in him. His eyes were unconsciously searching for something else, something hidden deeper.

'I remember there being a small training ground somewhere over there during my previous stay… Ah, there it is.'

Was it because of the dream about training? For some reason, he wanted to move, even if just a little, right then. Spotting a vacant lot in a corner of the garden, Yuder didn't hesitate to change his clothes. Slipping out unnoticed was no big deal.

The training ground, located a short distance away from the palace, seemed quite small compared to those designated for the Cavalry and the imperial knights. Had he not stayed here for a few days before, he would never have known such a place existed.

Yuder entered the ground, holding a decorative sword he had casually taken from the palace. Then he stopped in his tracks upon discovering a person who had arrived there before him.

…

Kishiar was swinging his sword in silence at the center of the training ground.

Despite the chilly weather, just enough to see his breath, he donned only a thin layer of training clothes. Yet, he didn't seem cold at all. From his shoulders, as he practiced one move after another with a wooden training sword, heat emanated, creating a mirage-like haze.

He swung, sliced, lunged forward, and stabbed. Then, with fluid motions, he kicked off the ground and circled back to make another powerful slash. Despite the simplicity of these actions, there was not a moment of hesitation. His movements flowed smoothly like unstoppable water, yet carried the weight of a massive mountain.

Yuder had known that Kishiar practiced his swordsmanship every dawn when they shared a room in Tainu. But seeing him now from the outside, he somehow appeared both unfamiliar and new. Unconsciously tracing Kishiar's movements with his eyes, Yuder suddenly realized why they felt so familiar and stiffened.

‘That is…’

If he was not mistaken, these were the same movements that appeared in the basic swordsmanship manual, the ones Yuder had tirelessly repeated in his recent dream.

Just as Yuder was planning to go down to the training ground and replicate those movements, Kishiar completed his final move. Lowering the sword he had held high, he turned around. His eyes, which had been frighteningly focused and devoid of emotion, changed the moment they met Yuder’s.

Yet, somehow, he felt slightly different from the usual Kishiar.

“Swinging a sword around at this hour? Did you sleep well?”

That peculiar atmosphere quickly dissolved the moment he spoke. Yuder looked up at the approaching man and nodded.

“Yes, I felt a bit stiff, so I came down.”

“How did you know about this place?”

“I passed by it when I was here before.”

“Ah, you did? You have a keen eye.”

“Is this a place you have always used for training?”

“Yes, that’s right. I used this place often until I left the palace. I even trained Nathan here.”

Kishiar looked around, smiling.

“Normally, such physically demanding training would be impossible, so we couldn’t have had a training ground. But I insisted on having one, even if it’s small.”

That explained why the training ground, despite being part of the palace, was so small and inconspicuous.

Kishiar kindly offered to lend Yuder a wooden training sword since he had finished his own practice. Yuder politely declined and assumed his stance with his decorative sword.

It was the first move of the same basic training manual Kishiar had been practicing earlier.

As he swung the sword, Yuder felt an unwavering gaze on him. Maybe it was because he had just dreamt about the past, but for some reason, the sensations overlapped.

Yuder shook off the weighty feeling clinging to his limbs and deliberately put more force into his moves. At first, he struggled to concentrate, but as he continued, his surroundings gradually faded from his consciousness.

After precisely ten repetitions, he lowered his sword and took a deep breath.

When he opened his eyes, there stood Kishiar, as still as if he had stepped out from the past.

Suddenly, something deep within his chest ached.

“Last night, I had a strange dream.”

In that odd atmosphere, Kishiar quietly spoke to Yuder.

“I don’t remember it well, but one thing is certain. I think I was watching you, just as you are now, swinging your sword. You followed the swordsmanship textbook to the letter.”

“What?”

For a moment, Yuder felt as if something heavy had abruptly settled upon him.

“This is the first time I’ve remembered a dream featuring you after waking up. Could it have been a premonition?”

Yuder licked his lips a few times, as if lost in thought, finally struggling to speak. “No, it probably wasn’t.”

“Why are you so sure?”

“Because… I had the same dream.”

Kishiar remained silent for a moment.

“So, this is another instance of a ‘connection’ similar to before?”

It probably was. He should have anticipated such an occurrence since Kishiar had a history of calling the name Yudrain in his sleep. However, he couldn’t help being surprised when it actually happened.

“I suppose that seems likely.”

“Sharing dreams, huh? Considering what happened yesterday, it’s not that surprising. It felt like it wasn’t my dream, so maybe this connection originated from you to me…”

The man who had been quietly speaking suddenly looked at Yuder’s face and shut his mouth, humming thoughtfully. A smile soon appeared on his face.

“The idea that my assistant was watching me even in a dream is suddenly so touching that I feel like crying. Do you often dream of me?”

Yuder had indeed often dreamed of Kishiar, but it wasn’t the Kishiar of the present.

“I suppose I should try to dream more often of being with you, since I can’t beat you at it.”

“You don’t need to make such an effort.”

Yuder sighed and replied. The man who had chuckled softly approached and put his arm around Yuder’s shoulder.

“If you’ve finished practicing, let’s go inside and have breakfast. We also need to think more about treatment options for you. You could catch a cold if you cool down too much.”

Guided by the arm pulling him, Yuder began to walk. When he glanced up, he no longer felt the strange atmosphere that had surrounded the man earlier.

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But it’s impossible to truly be indifferent about it.

Even after finishing breakfast and discussing with Kishiar on ways to treat the Emperor, as a continuation of yesterday’s conversation, thoughts about dream-sharing continually occupied a corner of Yuder’s mind.

Could the dream Kishiar had be exactly the same as Yuder’s? The memories were faint, so it was hard to say for sure. But what mattered was that it wasn’t the first time he had received information from a past life through a dream.

Previously, when Kishiar had sleep-talked the name Yudrain, he couldn’t remember anything. But this time, he retained some memories. What would happen the next time something like this occurred?

As the connection deepens and becomes more frequent, will such incidents increase as well?

Although it was still unclear, his thoughts were complicated.

As Yuder pondered over the ambiguous issues, a servant approached to clear away the empty plates and set down a new plate of pumpkin pie. It was already the fourth pie.

The pies weren’t tasteless, but how many had they baked to keep serving them endlessly? While eating the new pie and contemplating this minor question, Kishiar suddenly narrowed his eyes as he read a note handed to him by the servant.

“Oh, dear.”

“What’s the matter?”

“The Emperor says that meeting him again today will be difficult. We’ve been instructed to return and see him again in three days.”

Considering the Emperor’s health, they couldn’t afford to waste time. Yet, treatments needed to be carried out according to the will of the patient. The sudden change in plans likely meant that the Emperor’s side also required some preparation time.

“Three days should be sufficient… It might be beneficial to gather more information in the meantime.”

Coincidentally, after yesterday’s experience, he was curious about the difference between a person who had the Red Stone energy within them but hadn’t awakened and a normal person. It seemed like a good idea to look into it.

“How long has it been, Yuder?”

Yuder exchanged greetings with Alik, the apprentice of Thais Yulman, in the mage’s lab he hadn’t visited in quite some time.

Since Thais Yulman had conducted the most research on the power of the Red Stone, it was only natural for Yuder to seek him out.

“Ah, should I refer to you as Baron Aile now?”

“No, calling me as you always have is sufficient. Is Master Yulman in?”

“My Master is currently out but will return soon. Why don’t you wait here?”

As Yuder waited, Alik, who was quite affable, chatted about various topics.

“I heard you’ve made significant contributions in the West. I also heard you were injured. Are you alright now?”

“Yes, as you can see, I’m quite well now.”

Alik prattled on about how quiet it had been since most of the Cavalry members had gone to the West, and how his ability to summon water had improved under his Master’s strict tutelage. Then, his eyes gleamed, and he lowered his voice cautiously.

“Ah, by the way, that thing the Cavalry members discovered in the Great Sarain Forest. Was it really… that?”

Although he hadn’t specified what ‘that’ was, there was only one thing a mage would be excited enough to discuss. Yuder stared at Alik’s eager face and responded.

“Are you talking about the ruins discovered in the Great Sarain Forest?”

“Yes, exactly that!”

Alik took a deep, excited breath.

Because of that, there had been quite a commotion among mages lately. “However, it’s hard to get reliable information around here. I was going to ask the new mage who just arrived, but you need to know where they are to ask them, don’t you?”

The new mage in question was Hellem, but she hadn’t been back since she returned from the West and the entire Cavalry members took on vacation. It made sense they hadn’t met. It was likely that one of the buildings Emperor Keilusa had awarded would be converted into a monster-specific lab for her, so chances were they’d only meet after that.

‘But there’s no need to go into such detail.’

“Is it true that if you receive concentrated ancient magic from that place, anyone can use magic much more powerful than before? Is there really a mysterious treasure left by the Archmage? They say that the magic stone found there has unknown powers, is that true?”

The rapid-fire questions seemed endless. It appeared that the previous pleasantries were just a lead-in for these inquiries. Yuder sidestepped the questions with as much tact and ambiguity as possible.

“Well, it seems some exaggerated rumors have taken hold. I’m not well-versed in magic, so I can’t provide a detailed answer…”

“Come on, don’t be like that. Just tell me a bit. Is it really that”

“Alik! Where has that Alik gone again?”

Fortunately, before Yuder could be pestered further by the young mage, a savior appeared. Alik reflexively stood up, muttering, “My Master is here,” with a disappointed look on his face.

Yuder exited with him toward the lab entrance. But Thais Yulman, whom they finally met, was not alone. Seeing the aged mage supporting someone who appeared to have fainted, Alik’s face changed dramatically.

“Master! Who is that person? He’s not dead, is he? Surely you didn’t”

“What nonsense are you talking about? I met someone I know on the way. He fainted after hitting his head, so I brought him. Move him over there. He seems to have a lump; check it.”

“Oh, right, of course.”

Alik hastily took the limp body from his Master.

“Ah, my shoulders are killing me. Hmm? Who is this?”

The aged mage, massaging his shoulders, finally noticed Yuder and widened his eyes.

“Ha! Long time no see, Yuder!”

While Thais Yulman greeted Yuder warmly, Yuder did not reciprocate. He was distracted by the person Alik was moving; the back of the man’s head looked strangely familiar.

And when the man’s face was finally revealed as he lay on the sofa, Yuder immediately knew the source of his unease.

“Is that not… Mikalin Punt?”

“Correct. You two met in the West, didn’t you?”

The man Thais Yulman had brought was none other than the head of the Western Mage Union, Mikalin Punt. As Yuder frowned, puzzled as to why he would be in such a state, the old mage who had removed his coat began to explain.

“Well, I had to pick up some items from the Pearl Tower, you see. On my way back, I ran into this guy. Turns out he was planning to visit the Cavalry members today. So, since I’m staying with the Cavalry, I offered to guide him. For some reason, he got angry and made a fuss, then tripped and ended up like this. No gratitude, tsk tsk.”

“Ah, so that’s how it was.”

Yuder had a feeling that hearing Mikalin’s side of the story would offer a different perspective, but he decided not to probe any further. He would find out soon enough once Mikalin regained consciousness.

“And what brings you all the way here? Curious about the progress of my research?”

“Yes, that too… I also wanted to hear your opinions on the incidents I faced in the West. And I wanted to express my gratitude for the letter you sent me before leaving.”

Since he couldn’t discuss matters related to the Emperor in front of Mikalin, an outsider, Yuder decided to use the experiences he’d had in the West as a pretext to bait the conversation. After all, there were a few things he needed to tell Mikalin among those experiences; weaving the necessary discussions in between wouldn’t be difficult.

“Ah, I’ve already heard from Mikalin that my advice was of help. You did well to heed my words.”

Thais Yulman stroked his beard with a delighted expression and chuckled. He was blissfully unaware of how much resentment Mikalin had expressed towards him after reading that letter, and he would continue to remain in the dark.

“If only the Duke… ah, I mean the Commander, would appreciate my efforts and provide additional support for my research. I heard he promised substantial aid to the Western Mage Union, how envious that makes me.”

While expressing envy for the support promised to the Western Mage Union, the old mage’s hungry gaze was constantly directed at Yuder. Naturally, the real ‘support’ he wanted was permission to observe Yuder.

“If there’s specific support you’d like, please inform the Commander. As long as it’s not unreasonable, he’ll likely comply.”

“Uh… No, not yet. I’m not that careless with my own life, you know.”

With a disappointed tongue-click, Thais Yulman sunk deeper into his chair.

“Hmm, anyway, what did you want to discuss with me?”

“When we last met, you had discovered that a medium imbued with the power of the Red Stone could amplify an Awakener’s abilities. You also speculated that, conversely, an Awakener could absorb the power within the medium. Do you remember?”

“I did say that.”

Amplification had been proven through the body of Thais Yulman’s apprentice, Alik, but absorption remained an unverified hypothesis. However…

“It appears that I managed to achieve that absorption in the West.”

“What?”

The old mage leaped up, then sat back down. A flicker of what seemed like madness, mixed with keen interest and excitement, flashed through his wrinkled eyes.

“What do you mean? Explain in detail!”

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Yuder calmly withstood the intense gaze directed at him and slowly began to recount his experiences in the Great Sarain Forest.

“When I headed west, I took with me an object imbued with the power of the Red Stone. Later, I suffered an unexpected injury that left me incapacitated for a while.”

“I recall hearing something about a severe injury… Are you referring to that time?”

“Yes.”

The news of Yuder sustaining an injury while facing a colossal monster in the Great Sarain Forest was well-known. However, very few were aware that he had been unable to use his powers for some time afterward, aside from those directly involved at the time.

“I managed to heal, but then a situation arose where I had to use my powers while still not fully recovered. At that moment, I decided to use the object in my hand to amplify my abilities, but then…”

Just then, something unexpected happened.

A burst of red light emanated from the medium, connecting with the red power that resided in Yuder’s right hand. The two forces, both sharing the trait of being pure energy from the Red Stone, resonated with each other. Subsequently, Yuder regained his lost abilities.

This was entirely different from when Alik had held the object imbued with the power of the Red Stone.

After this event, the object that Yuder had carried changed color, and the power within it disappeared.

“The red light that came out of your hand must have been the one that came out during the accident that occurred in the basement of the Cavalry headquarters at that time! Ah…! To think such a thing would happen again…”

Thais Yulman, who seemed as if he desperately wanted to know everything, finally managed to suppress his emotions before sharing his thoughts.

“Anyway, if what you say is true, then it’s clear that you absorbed the medium’s power. Astonishing, truly astonishing.”

“Do you think so?”

“What else could it be?”

Thais Yulman’s long beard quivered with excitement as he gave a decisive answer.

“This proves that my theories were not in vain! I’m dying to know if there are others who can also absorb the power stored in such mediums! How have your powers been since then? How about the potency and duration? Have you attempted absorption again?”

“As you know, the medium is confidential and dangerous. I haven’t tried it again since then. I don’t necessarily feel that my abilities have become stronger, but it certainly helped me regain the power I had lost.”

“Hmm, I see. I do want to figure out why the absorption that was impossible for Alik worked for you. But comparing your abilities to Alik’s now would be difficult due to the vast gap in power. Still, I’ve discovered through my research that by increasing the time spent

using the medium for amplification, abilities can slightly evolve. That's a significant finding!"

"Is that so?"

"Indeed. I consider it akin to the theory that the more one is exposed to the Red Stone's power, the higher the chance of becoming an Awakener. It's a result not too different from what I had previously thought! If one could utilize the medium's power as freely as you did, then building upon that…"

As his mumbling grew faster, it seemed he was on the verge of being lost in his own thoughts once again. Whether Yuder responded or not, the old mage was too engrossed in his own theories to notice. Yuder quietly observed him.

Now is the perfect time to bring up the real issue.

With a casual expression, he posed a question.

"…Master Yulman, what do you think distinguishes those who awaken from those who are exposed to the power of the Red Stone but do not awaken?"

"Ah, that is indeed one of the subjects that fascinates me. As I just said, it's certain that prolonged and significant exposure to that power can change a human body. But as you've mentioned, it doesnt affect everyone."

Thais Yulman took Yuder's bait immediately. He seamlessly shifted the topic and continued speaking.

"You might know better than I do, but most of those who turned into Awakeners were neither too young nor too old; they were mostly young adults. This doesn't mean that the younger you are, the more likely you are to awaken. Furthermore, among mages, knights who

can use aura, or priests, have there been any who have awakened? Of course, my own disciple is the first case.”

Technically, Kishiar would have been the first, Yuder thought, but he simply nodded. In the future, the limitations would expand, and even young children or elders, as well as priests and knights, would become Awakeners. But for now, such cases were rare, which in itself was thought-provoking.

Thais Yulman seemed to think so as well.

“A priest from the South, who is acquainted with me, once said this, ‘God gave each human a vessel of different sizes, allowing them to fill it with whatever they like, but they can’t overflow it.’ Ive wondered if that might apply in this case as well.”

It was a somewhat ambiguous statement. Thais Yulman looked at Yuders puzzled eyes with satisfaction and explained with fervor.

“Look, children and elders either have vessels that haven’t properly formed yet or have lived long enough that theres no room for anything new. Knights, priests, and mages are those who have already filled their vessels with the power they possess. There may be those whose vessels are less full, but such cases are not common, are they?”

“That seems plausible,” Yuder conceded.

“As for me, I’m an obsolete mage with no potential for further development, but my disciple, Alik, was considered to have potential for growth if he trained diligently. In other words, his vessel was still empty, creating room for the transformation into an Awakener.”

“Hmm”

“Based on this hypothesis, while you all were in the West, I have been continuously researching the relationship between the medium

and Alik, and under what circumstances and conditions an Awakeners abilities continue to change.”

According to Thais, when Alik attempted to amplify his power using the medium, the increase in ability was not always at a consistent level. After more than a hundred attempts to understand this discrepancy, Alik told his Master he felt he was onto something.

“According to Alik, when he felt that the power was amplifying more than usual, it was during moments when he was desperate and yearning for self-improvement. The more stable his mental state, the less the power increased, and there was no further development of abilities.”

After repeated experiments, Thais Yulman became convinced that it wasn’t just a matter of perception. He formulated a new hypothesis.

“Consider this. Perhaps becoming an Awakener isn’t just influenced by physical condition and innate talent, but also by some measure of one’s inner self. Don’t you think so?”

‘Physical condition and the inner self… along with desires.’

The thought carried a certain gravitas. As Yuder pondered, Thais Yulman’s eyes gleamed and he continued.

“It’s fascinating, and not dissimilar to the requirements for becoming a mage. First, one has to be born with the ability to sense magic energy. Next comes having a robust heart and vessel that can accumulate and absorb that energy, and, of course, willpower.”

Those talented in magic could gather energy much more effectively and use powerful spells much more quickly than other mages. But it wasn’t as if the opposite meant no hope at all.

“Well, if you’re not like me, who wisely chose to abandon wasting time early on and turned to scholarly pursuits, practicing in areas rich in magic energy will definitely boost your magic power. This has been empirically proven by mages over time.”

“I see.”

“Yes. So if you think of the power of the Red Stone as similar to magic energy, it only makes sense that Alik, who has trained relentlessly while surrounded by the densest energy, has grown stronger, doesn’t it?”

Sensing that the old mage Thais Yulman was veering off track again, Yuder skillfully steered the conversation back.

“So, if I understand you correctly, you’re suggesting that even someone who’s not currently an Awakener could become one if exposed to a large amount of the Red Stone’s power, or if they hold intense desires when they are most susceptible to changethat is, when their ‘vessel’ is empty?”

“Exactly so. But of course, that’s not all there is to it. This is still an unproven hypothesis, after all. Think of it as adding just one more condition to the still-unknown factors that contribute to someone becoming an Awakener.”

‘Well, I myself became an Awakener for no apparent reason, so that can’t be the only factor.’

Yuder considered several new ideas based on what Thais Yulman had said.

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The Red Stone transforms humans into Awakeners. Just as those who awakened at the beginning who have great ‘innate physical talent’ to the point where they can change nearly in an instant just by accepting a small amount of power, on the opposite end, there are also those who have talent but undergo slower transformations.

The conditions that bridge the slight gap between the Awakener and the non-Awakener might even lie within the individuals themselves.

Now I understand where this intuition came from.

Yuder recalled Hinn Eldore, who had awakened the ability to teleport alone to save the endangered Gakane, and Prince Ejain, who had suddenly awakened in the face of near-death threats.

One was already an Awakener, and the other had the potential to awaken in the future. What they had in common was that both had gained power through intense yearning while in perilous situations.

Hadn’t it already been known that Awakeners could seize the opportunity to gain great power when emitting intense yearning? Perhaps it was no surprise that the same could be applied to the process of awakening itself.

This is definitely worth testing.

Though it was hard to trust him completely as a human being, Thais Yulman was indeed an extraordinary mage in this area. Yuder was again struck by how fearlessly and unhesitatingly he delved into the research of previously unseen phenomena, perhaps because he had long studied magic power, something similar yet different.

Yuder found it increasingly fortunate that Thais Yulman had come under his and the Cavalry, binding himself with an oath, rather than staying in the Pearl Tower.

“Master! Master Mikalin has regained consciousness!”

Not long after, Alik, who had been taking care of Mikalin, called out to them. Mikalin was clutching his swollen head and moaning when he abruptly shouted upon seeing Thais.

“Thais Yulman! You…! When you can’t match me with magic, you dare to trip me…! Where did you learn such disgraceful, un-magelike behavior?”

“Hmm, for someone who left the Pearl Tower, you have no decency, calling the name of a senior like me so carelessly and making up false allegations. Who do you think went through all the trouble of bringing you, who was lying down so disgracefully, all the way here? Aren’t you ashamed before my younger disciple and outsiders?”

“Quiet! Where the hell is this place? If you’ve kidnapped me to make me an experiment, throw me out right now!”

“My, you really don’t trust anyone, do you? I thought living in the West might have improved you, but you’re the same as ever.”

Thais Yulman calmly stroked his beard and tilted his head. To any casual observer, he appeared to be an innocent, kindly old man, but none in that room were fooled by his demeanor.

While Alik, who knew his Master’s character well, sighed and thought, ‘Typical of my Master…’, Yuder approached the fuming Mikalin and greeted him.

“Hello, Mikalin.”

“Why are you here, Yuder…!”

Mikalin immediately recognized Yuder.

“This is where the Cavalry headquarters is located. Are you feeling alright? I heard you met with each other on your way here…”

“Wait, is this really the Cavalry? Not that mad old man’s laboratory?”

While the location indeed doubled as Thais Yulman’s research lab, the fact that he was conducting research here was not something to be disclosed in detail.

“Yes, this is the Cavalry. May I ask what brings you here?”

“Ah, well… I had just finished my court appearances and was on my way to meet His Grace, the Duke of Peletta, and you. However, I only knew that the Cavalry was located within the Imperial Knights’ territory. Navigating was not easy. Eventually, I encountered that old man, but… let’s not go into further details, it gives me a headache.”

Mikalin muttered curses under his breath as he staggered to his feet.

“If I’m in the right place, let’s get out of here. I don’t want to spend another second in the same space with that guy.”

“Mikalin, if you’re leaving, I have one thing to say. Clean up your beard and hair a bit. What’s the state of your appearance? It’s downright slovenly.”

“Why youjudging me as if I’m not even a mage!”

“Let’s go.”

Yuder led Mikalin out of the building. The moment Thais Yulman disappeared from sight, Mikalin quickly reverted to his usual

demeanor that Yuder was familiar with. Grumbling but standing upright, the elderly mage, who led the Western Mage Union, assumed a solemn posture and expressed his gratitude to Yuder.

“Thank you. Because of you, I was saved from further embarrassment.”

Perhaps due to their frequent interactions in the West and the fact that Yuder had helped him escape from Thais Yulman, Mikalin’s tone had become considerably friendlier.

“You’re welcome.”

“Ah, I heard you’ve been granted the title of Baron. Our Mage Union has sent a small gift to congratulate you, although it probably hasn’t arrived yet. Shall I call you ‘Baron’ from now on?”

Having been asked a similar question multiple times already today, Yuder concealed a sigh and nodded. After briefly conveying that it was okay to call him the same as in the past, he received some well-intended advice that being too modest was also not good.

“Speaking of which, ever since I brought that letter, I’ve sensed that you and the Cavalry share a deep bond. Makes sense. To you, the power of an Awakener is more appealing than an untapped gold mine.”

Mikalin mumbled as if he understood even without being told. He refrained from asking any more about why Thais Yulman was here, instead cursing for a while, but closed his mouth when the main building of the Cavalry appeared. It was far more elaborate than he had expected.

Though not ostentatious, the faade was as impressive as any space designed for knights or mages, captivating one’s eyes instantly. The sounds of Cavalry members training and periodic explosive noises in the distance made the old mage tense, but Yuder

didn’t even blink. He seemed quite accustomed to such noise and pressure.

‘So this is the Cavalry… truly the focal point of the new power cultivated by the Emperor and the Duke of Peletta.’

Where he once would have considered it an inconsequential place filled with commoners, the elder mage, now fully aware of the Cavalrys accomplishments in the West, found nothing mundane about it.

“If you’re not feeling well, I can arrange for you to meet our priest before taking you to the Commander’s office. What would you like to do?”

“Ah, if it’s the priest of the Cavalry, would that be the person I know? If so, I’d prefer to meet him after seeing the Duke.”

“Understood. Then let’s…”

Upon entering the building, Mikalins amazement did not cease.

‘Is that a glowstone? To embed such valuable stones in every corridor. Even our Western Mage Unions headquarters doesnt have these’

“Be careful. There’s a child ahead.”

“A child? Where?”

Mikalin, who had been looking around, turned his head at the odd remark. He blinked in surprise upon discovering a tiny kitten sprawled on the railing of the staircase he was about to touch.

Did he just call this kitten a child?

The kitten, wearing a red silk ribbon around its neck, yawned lazily as soon as it made eye contact with Mikalin. Its swaying tail

wrapped around Yuder’s wrist before falling back down. Yuder glanced down indifferently at the kitten and offered a short greeting.

“Ah, hello.”

There was something different about the greeting, something that didn’t quite fit with a mere acknowledgement of the animal’s cuteness. But Mikalin couldn’t put his finger on what exactly it was. He alternated his gaze between the kitten and Yuder, his mouth closed so tightly that wrinkles formed on his chin.

Could it be… Even if there are Awakeners with all kinds of bizarre abilities, could someone actually turn into an animal? And even if they could, wouldnt they be doing something rather than lazing around like this?

Confused, they continued to climb the stairs, finally reaching the entrance to the top-floor office.

“Commander, it’s Yuder Aile. We have a guest.”

Knocking on the door, Yuder Aile announced their business and stepped inside. Mikalin finally came face to face with the reason he had come hereDuke Peletta.

“Greetings, Your Grace, Duke Peletta.”

“It’s been a while, Mikalin. I thought youd be busy enjoying the trial of Duke Tain in the capital. Have you finished all your affairs there?”

The young Duke was still breathtakingly handsome. However, knowing what kind of terrifying things lay beneath that beauty, Mikalin braced himself, refusing to be lulled by Peletta’s casual smile.

He had not forgotten the days when Duke Peletta, with that very face, had relentlessly pressured him. Whether it was promising eternal support for the Union and their research, only to cunningly lock the mouths of Mikalin and his fellow mages with a vow, or manipulating magic power even as an AwakenerMikalin had not forgotten any of it.

But despite all that, he bore no animosity, and even held a certain degree of admiration for the Duke, given their different life experiences and viewpoints. The abilities of Duke Peletta Kishiar La Orr were indeed remarkable.

“Yes, most of my tasks in the capital are done. Baron Wilhelm, who was as much an enemy to our Union as anyone could be, was stripped of his title and had his assets confiscated before being exiled to a southern island. As for Duke Tain, a verdict has not been reached, but it seems likely hell be exiled as well.”

“I see.”

Duke Peletta smiled as if he already knew all of this.

“Yes, so before I left the capital, I thought Id pay you a visit and bring some news.”

“Any interesting news?”

“Yes, the first thing I’d like to mention is… The reaction to the recently released ‘Yuder No. 1’ has been quite heated.”

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Yuder No. 1. It was the name of a dispelling magic created to neutralize the toxic traces of the colossal monster that had unnaturally covered Yuder's body. Thanks to this magic spell, laboriously crafted by the mages of the Western Mage Union and Kishiar working together, Yuder was able to regain his lost vision and recover his skin, which had been marred with dark stains.

Later on, Micalin decided to name the completed new magic spell "Yuder No. 1," following academic protocol that new magic spells should be formally submitted. It was on this occasion, during his visit to the capital, that he finally announced it.

"Frankly, the reaction was expected. Though it's a large-scale magic spell that normally wouldn't even be possible to cast without the immense magic energy embedded in the Great Sarain Forest, the fact that it succeeded in neutralizing the monster's influence alone marks a milestone in the history of magic," Micalin said, his face flush with pride. "You wouldn't believe how much interest the foreign mages, who were here for an exchange, have shown."

Micalin's gaze clouded over, his proud face suddenly turning somber. "However, aside from my pride as a mage I do have some reservations."

"Why?"

"It hasn't been easy to divert all attention to our Union, keeping anonymous the fact that your Grace led the completion of the magic spell. There are too many people curious about the circumstances at the time. Someone might guess the truth eventually."

Micalin sighed deeply, and for a moment, Yuder's gaze shifted to Kishiar before returning.

‘So they decided to officially hide Kishiar’s involvement in the announcement about the creation of the magic spell I hadn’t realized, but it makes sense.’

Indeed, while Kishiar had declared his ambition to reveal himself as the rightful owner of the Divine Sword, magic was a separate matter. Yuder could guess multiple reasons why he would choose to hide it.

However, knowing this didn’t lift Yuder’s spirits. After all, he knew that Kishiar’s power had been the most significant influence in the creation and completion of the magic spell.

“Isn’t that something we’ve already anticipated? Handle it so my name doesn’t come out. I trust you have the skill to manage that,” Kishiar said.

“Of course, I understand Alright,” Micalin agreed, bowing his head. Then he turned his gaze back to Yuder. “Ah, and due to the magic spell bearing your name, interest in you Baron Aile, and the Cavalry has significantly increased among the mages. Many were especially astonished that an Awakener could also rely on magic for healing. You might soon receive contact from both the Pearl Tower and the Court Mage Office.”

“Hmm. The Pearl Tower and the Court Mage Office, you say?”

While Kishiar mumbled with what seemed like genuine interest, Yuder couldn’t care less. Whether the mages took interest in him or not was of no importance to him.

“Also, one more piece of news it seems that the expansion of the Great Sarain Forest has finally stopped for sure.”

According to Micalin, nearly half of the vast amounts of pure magic energy that had begun to flow out of the suspected magic spring ruins had now been expelled. As a result, the forest, which

had been expanding for a long time, had finally halted its growth, and logging was currently underway at its fringes.

“Now, there are no longer any abnormal plant growths in that place. Animals have begun to enter the forest, and birds have made their nests. The yearly occurrences of monsters within the forest have also drastically decreased, making it almost peaceful now. And yet”

Micalin, who had been speaking with a faint smile, suddenly grew serious again.

“We’ve also confirmed that the flow of dense magic energy originating from the forest is now spreading throughout the entire western region.”

Yuder was certain that this was probably the most crucial part of what Micalin had come to tell Kishiar today.

“That’s obviously not the end of it.”

“Indeed. Our Union believes that if left unchecked, this magic energy could eventually envelop the entire world. It’s that pure of an energy. While it may not be the complete solution to the waning of magic power, this phenomenon is sure to astonish the whole world.”

“Then we should make another announcement regarding this matter.”

Kishiar murmured, his face calm.

“Yes. Thanks to the excellent cooperation from Baron Koelt, who has become a new pillar of Tainu, we’re tracking the spread and concentration of this magic energy flow smoothly. I’ll send another report soon, alongside the progress of Yuder No. 2’s research.”

“Understood. If you’re short on manpower, let me know.”

A smile crossed Micalin's sharp, raptor-like face. He seemed satisfied that he had successfully finished reporting and secured ongoing sponsorship.

And then Yuder took the opportunity to ask a question as the conversation concluded.

"But what is this Yuder No. 2 you mentioned? I've never heard of it before."

"Hm? You didn't know? One of the research projects we're working on is based on Yuder No. 1. It aims to develop a simpler magic spell to help those who have been poisoned by monsters."

Micalin cheerfully responded, as if asking how Yuder could not have known.

"While research on monsters and magic is important, it seemed too wasteful to use Yuder No. 1 just once and dispose of it. Fortunately, modifying it is much easier than developing a new magic spell, so the project is progressing swiftly."

The other mages also welcomed the development of Yuder No. 2, a fact Micalin was pleased to share. He looked decades younger than when Yuder first met him. Just from his expression, one could tell how much he was enjoying life these days. Yuder simply nodded, having nothing more to say.

After all, there was no reason to be upset when the research was going well and troublesome individuals like Baron Willhem were facing consequences.

After exchanging a few more opinions, Yuder escorted Micalin to the first floor medical unit. Priest Lusan, who had been in the middle of prayers, was startled by the unexpected visitor but soon healed Micalin's head bump with divine power.

“It was quite a significant bump. While it has healed, I would recommend not lying down on that side for a few days.”

“That darn old man… Ah, thank you, anyway.”

Micalin barely maintained his social decorum, grinding his teeth as he bowed his head.

“Micalin, can you find your way back without an escort?”

“If you could call a carriage for me, that would be better. The very thought of walking back to my lodging is daunting… In any case, thank you for guiding this old body of mine. I’ve certainly been a handful, despite the hospitality.”

Micalin bowed, maintaining his dignity, and Yuder felt a sense of accomplishment in successfully aiding the conversation between Micalin and Kishiar.

“Before anything else, I’m simply the assistant to the Commander of the Cavalry. I only did what I ought to have done, so please think nothing of it.”

“You really haven’t changed.”

Micalin let out a long sigh, his eyes wrinkling at the corners.

“Speaking of Yuder No. 1 and 2 from earlier To tell you the truth, one reason I wanted to name the spell after you was to encourage mages to be less antagonistic toward Awakeners, so they wouldn’t live to regret it, like I have.”

“Is that so?”

Caught off guard by the unexpected statement, Yuder slowly blinked his eyes and inquired further.

“Yes. You might not understand from your perspective, but I thought it would be helpful in some way. Of course, I considered the possibility that you might decline but since you’ve given your consent, I intend to use it well. I would be pleased if it proves useful someday.”

Having said this, Micalin left the Cavalry. Yuder returned to the Commander’s office where Kishiar was and relayed Micalin’s words, asking if he had any idea what they meant.

“I don’t understand how naming a spell after me would help to lessen mages’ hostility toward Awakeners. Do you have any idea, Commander?”

“To understand that, you’d have to delve into why mages dislike Awakeners in the first place.”

Within the complex emotions of the mages who despised Awakeners, jealousy had found a place. In a time when even summoning a simple flame had become rare due to years of diligent study and cultivation, the news of Awakeners wielding potent natural powers with ease was more than enough to provoke shock and hatred.

“Someone like you, an Awakener who uses a power similar to magic, recovering from injuries by relying on magic rather than the power of an Awakener or a priest, would be a very significant event for them. Names can’t be used without the consent of the person involved, so that could strengthen their change in perception even more.”

Could mages really change their ways just because of something like that? It was still hard to comprehend even after the explanation. Nevertheless, Yuder responded that he understood. After all, if naming the spell Yuder No. 1 could alleviate mages’ irrational apprehension of Awakeners and make them more cooperative, sacrificing a name was a small price to pay.

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“Come to think of it, I heard you visited the mage’s research lab today. Did you bring Micalin back from there?”

Sensing that Yuder had entirely put aside his thoughts about mage, Kishiar smoothly changed the subject.

“Yes.”

“Did you find what you were looking for?”

“I’ve heard something from Master Yulman that could be of assistance in our current situation. Actually, I was planning on reporting it to you first…”

“Intriguing. Let’s hear it then.”

Kishiar set down the documents he had been holding. The man, now wearing a different smile than when he had faced Micalin, rested his chin on his hands and looked at Yuder with the utmost attention. If anyone had witnessed the sudden change in his demeanor, they would have been shocked. But Yuder, unbothered, said what he had to say.

Master Thais Yulman had concluded through relentless research, using his apprentice Alik’s power and medium, that the ‘inner self’ of Awakenersor those with the potential to awakencould influence the acquisition of power.

If that were true, then they could find answers to both why the Emperor had yet to awaken despite already harboring the Red Stone power within him, and how they could facilitate his awakening.

After explicitly explaining all these points, Yuder finally added his own thoughts.

“Based on my experiences, I already knew that Awakeners experience rapid power growth when they possess intense desires. However, there’s no guarantee that things will go as one wishes, so it’s not entirely a good thing…”

“So, what you’re saying is that if already Awakeners can gain power through this method, then those who haven’t awakened but have the qualities and conditions may also expedite their awakening for the same reasons.”

“Yes, exactly.”

“Will and desire, huh…”

Kishiar muttered quietly, his gaze drifting off as if lost in thought.

“Indeed, His Majesty never seemed to hold any expectations of awakening in a way similar to me.”

“…”

Emperor Keilusa had personally ordered the retrieval of the Red Stone. He had always kept the medium in his chamber and never skimped on supporting the related research.

However, that didn’t necessarily mean the Emperor genuinely wished to awaken.

Yuder had sensed it beforepeering into the Emperor’s interior.

The Emperor had no hope or expectations for the future, as he felt his imminent demise was inevitable. Though he must have wanted to live, like any other human, he preferred reducing the current uncertainties rather than risking an uncertain future.

His objectivity even when judging himself, the cold rationality that refused to display mercy beyond reason.

His resolve to burn through the end of his life as efficiently as possible while preparing for what comes next.

These were all valuable traits, but they were precisely what prevented the Emperor from exhibiting any will or desire beyond what was necessary, leading to the current state of affairs.

“But having heard what you’ve said now, it gives me a new line of thought that I hadn’t considered before.”

“And what would that be?”

“According to what you’ve said, awakening is ultimately the Red Stone’s power settling within a human body, undergoing transformations according to the individual’s desires. In that case, couldn’t the type of power bestowed upon the Awakeners also be influenced to some extent by their aptitude and desires? Whether the individual is aware of it or not.”

Yuder paused to ponder, then slowly nodded his head. Kishiar continued to speak.

“You may already know this, but when I first awakened, I yearned to live more desperately than anyone else. If the power granted to me by my awakening is what has made me this way, then I think I understand why the energy within me takes the form of protecting its vessel, unlike others.”

Yuder’s gaze involuntarily dropped to Kishiar’s abdomen. A sudden realization about an aspect he had not previously considered sent chills down his spine.

“…Ah, I see.”

The power of Kishiar La Orr is to either attract or repel.

Until recently, it had been believed that this power could only be applied to what one could see or touch. It was understandable to think that way since Kishiar primarily used it in combat to swiftly and efficiently dispose of his enemies. Even Kishiar himself hadn't considered there might be more to it.

However, they had just recently realized that this wasn't the case.

If this power could apply to the intangible, metaphysical 'force' itself, then it stood to reason that the power within Kishiar could likewise be mobilized in that way.

"I didn't realize it until now because I've been like this since my awakening… but perhaps the Awakening power that was protecting my vessel was something I was 'pulling in' myself."

Perhaps, ever since his awakening until now, he had been doing so subconsciously.

"Of course, this power is not omnipotent. If the source of the power sustains damage that cannot be healed, or if the gathered vessel is struck once more, I can't guarantee what will happen next. However, knowing this allows us to prepare, which is entirely different from living in ignorance."

Kishiar might not have known, but Yuder's heart began to pound painfully at those words.

Because he knew that in a previous life, Kishiar had indeed twice sustained damage to his vessel, ultimately hurtling toward a swift death.

"And perhaps the reason you thought His Majestys condition was suddenly deteriorating may have been due to the Red Stone energy believed to be present in his body?"

“What do you mean?”

“Think about it. If we’re right, His Majesty’s current situation could be due to a continually accumulating new energy in his body while the vessel remains unstable. Since His Majesty hasn’t awakened, that power neither moves nor gathers according to his will, but disperses. If that power continues to accumulate…”

They had already seen how unchanneled power, dispersed throughout the body, could bring unbearable agony.

And a bitter, cold smile surfaced on Kishiar’s face, who probably knew more about that pain than anyone else.

“…However, there are two positives. One, His Majesty has opened up to us, so our efforts should be easier than before. And two”

The possibility that even if Emperor Keilusa did not awaken, Yuder and Kishiar combined might still be able to gather that Red Stone power and protect the Emperor’s vessel.

Gazing into the eyes of the man who had mentioned these two advantages, Yuder nodded.

“Yes, it’s good to know we have two things working in our favor. We will definitely succeed.”

At that, Kishiar blinked for a moment before melting into a warm smile.

“It’s strange. I didn’t say this because I wanted to hear such assurances, but your words always make me realize just how much confidence I’ve needed.”

I already know why. It’s because many people wanted Kishiar La Orr to live that way, and he acted accordingly.

Even after making judicious and wise decisions, Kishiar wasn't yet accustomed to trusting his own conclusions. That fact was subtly conveyed through his words.

Understanding someone brought a type of pain Yuder had never known before. But if it meant he could keep seeing the smile before him, perhaps that was alright. Yuder blankly gazed at the man's smiling face before lowering his eyes.

"If we're both heading down an unfamiliar path, then walking one where we can see even a little is far easier than walking one where we can't see anything at all. From my perspective, it's well worth trying," Yuder stated.

"Well worth trying," Kishiar repeated after him.

"Yes. A person who would leap in without hesitation at the slightest possibility. That's my assistant for you."

"…"

"In that case, I'll also consider it worth trying. Until I see His Majesty again, I'll have to continue practicing how to control this power."

"Can you really master it through practice?"

"Why wouldn't I?"

With a smiling face, the man effortlessly clenched and unclenched his hand. A small orb of condensed energy appeared over his palm.

The swirling ball of energy closely resembled what Kishiar had unleashed to deal with the assassins who had suddenly appeared during the Harvest Festival.

However, unlike before, this newly manifested orb of energy was almost entirely red, marking the difference from the previous instance.

“Is that could it be the power of the Awakener?”

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“Is that… the power of the Awakener?”

“More precisely, it’s an object infused with the power of the Awakener and Aura. Aura is best suited for manifesting it in this form.”

According to him, it was a physical manifestation of compressed power. It seemed that Kishiar could mix all the types of power he possessed. The man explained every detail, even those he had kept secret during the procession.

“You’ve seen something similar before, haven’t you? Last time, I combined it with air and used a ‘pushing’ force, making it quick to use. However, mixing two or more requires a considerable amount of energy just to create.”

His words sounded simple, but the reality was anything but. Though he spoke of an extraordinary feat that no one else had accomplished, Kishiar remained unfazed.

“No need to be so surprised. It appears simple, but it drains a lot of energy. In practice, I only use it after balancing the internal forces and practicing power regulation.”

“What do you mean by balancing internal forces?”

“It means maintaining a balance among the various powers I possess, so that one doesn’t dominate or become too weak. After using a lot of magic, it’s good to draw out an equal amount of other powers. The same applies in reverse.”

Kishiar clenched and unclenched his fist again. The red orb disappeared, and this time a new orb appeared, shimmering in

shades of gold and blue. In this manner, he continued to produce orbs of different colors and auras, each with a distinct oppressive force, only for them to vanish moments later.

He stopped only when he had summoned the red orb again, identical to the one he had first brought forth.

It wouldn’t be an exaggeration to say that the small orb contained the fruits of the long, agonizing journey he had survived.

And now, he was prepared to pour that power into saving his own flesh and blood.

Their eyes met in quiet understanding. No words were exchanged, yet Yuder felt an emotion more profound than words could express.

It was a surge of willpower, more intense than ever before.

“Nahan, Nahan is back!”

A loud cry echoed unexpectedly through the hidden village of the Star of Nagran, in the harsh and desolate southern desert.

The faces of the surprised villagers converged on the man who had just passed through the entrance.

His face was unmistakable, even from a distance. One side was marred by a vivid burn scar, while the other was smooth and cold. His clothing couldn’t conceal the visible scars that covered his body. His gaze was so chilling that no one dared approach him.

Frozen, not knowing how to react, the villagers watched as Nahan looked around and finally broke into a smile.

“Why the long faces? Did you all think I was dead?”

It was only then that everyone snapped out of their stupor. Those who usually followed Nahan warmly started to choke up, calling his name, while those who had been distant exchanged surprised and awkward glances.

The chaos settled down only when Nahan and the village leaders found themselves face to face in a room designated for meetings.

“How did you survive, Nahan? We thought you and all the other brothers and sisters were captured by the Cavalry and killed without a chance.”

“Unfortunately, I didn’t die. Were there no others among my brothers and sisters who made it back?”

“No, you’re the only one. Weren’t you there? How could you not know?”

“We were all scattered at the time. Barely making it back alive was a feat in itself for me.”

As Nahan responded calmly, someone in the room shot up, his face twisted with rage, and shouted while pointing a finger.

“What’s there to be so proud of? You alone made it back alive? You can’t even account for the lives of those who trusted you enough to go with you. How does that make sense?”

“Calm down, Maek.”

“Calm down? Is this a situation to calm down? Our western stronghold was utterly destroyed because of him! We lost people who were doing just fine until they decided to follow him. And all he has to say is that he didn’t know?”

The particularly enraged individual had left the western stronghold for the south after it had fallen. As he trembled with fury,

huge horns and spikes emerged from his body. Those sitting next to Nahan stood up to block him.

“Isn’t it a relief that at least one person made it back alive? What more do you want from Nahan, who has been more devoted to our cause than anyone else? Do you expect him to take responsibility and die?”

“This is absurd. Did Nahan force anyone to go with him? He acted to aid Sister Ershi. Everyone decided and resolved themselves to go. The misfortune that happened there is the fault of the Cavalry, not Brother Nahan!”

At this point, those who followed the sage stood up in opposition.

“You always say that Nahan is faultless. Can you claim that he bears no responsibility in all of this?”

“Why does that guy always have to be the one to act? We just want to live peacefully!”

“No one told you not to live peacefully. Nahan and the rest of us are merely acting on behalf of our suffering brothers and sisters who couldn’t attain that peace!”

In the midst of the escalating shouting match, some who had no particular allegiance looked around nervously, caught in the maelstrom of raw emotions.

In the end, the meeting surrounding Nahan disintegrated without achieving anything substantive. No one was able to engage in meaningful discussion. Surrounded by those loyal to him, Nahan stepped out, passing through the icy stares.

“Nahan, are you alright? The atmosphere was terrible due to the tense nerves of the brothers and sisters from the western stronghold. Don’t take their harsh words to heart.”

“Yes, those people are just a minority. How are your injuries? They look like they haven’t been treated properly… Can someone get some medicine?”

“…I’m fine. There’s no need.”

For the first time, Nahan’s voice flowed from his lips that had been silent. He spoke as he looked at the faces of those he had personally rescued or helped.

“More importantly, I’m curious why the Sage isn’t here.”

“Ah, the Sage is… not here at the moment. You see…”

Noticing Nahan’s sharp gaze, the crowd hesitated before answering.

“To resolve this matter and protect the village, he went to the capital… with a few people…”

“…The capital?”

Nahan’s eye twitched. Sensing that subtle reaction, those around him reluctantly replied.

“Ah, yes. I don’t know the details.”

“If the sage himself has gone to the capital, it’s not a trivial matter. Do any of you brothers know more?”

“Shayman, you were at the meeting, weren’t you?”

“Well…”

The one called Shayman turned his eyes away, his face uneasy. The look in his eyes indicated he knew that the information he possessed was extremely dangerous.

A moment later, he closed his eyes tightly and muttered, “Someone very special is in the center of the capital. Someone related to the people who have been helping us for a long time…”

Some did not yet grasp what that meant, but others knew what Nahan disliked as much as he despised the non-Awakeners. Amidst the sound of collective swallowing, Nahan maintained his silence for a while.

“…”

Even his comrades couldn’t guess what he was thinking. All the while, other Awakeners passed by them, giving them cold and suspicious glances as if they were looking at foreigners.

Finally, Nahan spoke again.

“How long has it been since the sage left the village?”

“It’s been quite some time. He left almost immediately after we heard the news that you might have all been captured or killed in the west.”

“I see.”

His voice was so soft and soothing it sent shivers down one’s spine. Even those who followed Nahan momentarily felt a chill. They hastily tried to comfort him.

“Look, Nahan. We knew you might be concerned about this… But the sage had no choice. We thought all of you had died… He thought this was the best option.”

“Right. Let’s complete the treatment first, then contact the sage to confirm things. We will assist you.”

“If only Hosanna was here, it would’ve been easier to go there right away…”

The one who carelessly mentioned Hosanna’s name snapped his mouth shut as looks of reproach poured in from others.

And Nahan, surprisingly, smiled behind a hidden face.

“Nahan…?”

“Why, what is it?”

“Was it really an unavoidable situation?”

“What?”

“No, I don’t think so.”

His soft voice gradually lost its warmth.

“My head aches. Yes… we need to confirm this.”

The night fell over the Sun Palace, as if anticipating the events to come. It was eerily quiet.

Yuder stepped down from the carriage and looked up at the grand building.

Finally, tonight, the fate of Emperor Keilusa would be decided.

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Chapter 548

“Please come this way, I will guide you.”

Yuder turned his gaze toward the chief attendant he had met once again. The weight reflected in his expression was entirely different than before. The old man, although aged, maintained an upright posture. He bowed courteously and briefly scanned the faces of the two people who had alighted from the carriage behind Yuder.

The order to bring suitable personnel from the Cavalry for palace security had come just last night. There was a clear reason for this unexpected command.

The Emperor’s side had determined that details of the recent events occurring within the Sun Palace had likely leaked to the outside world. Despite his caution, Yuder felt anew how difficult it was to move securely. He discussed this with Kishiar and they decided to add two more allies to their circle.

‘Given the situation, it’s natural to include Kanna who can read information. Gakane can perfectly balance both combat and tracking while effectively protecting Kanna, so he should also be included.’

Kanna’s ability was indispensable, particularly in a situation like this. However, she had the drawback of being weak in combat and unable to move quickly. Gakane’s shadow clone, which had an advantage in the darkness of night, compensated for these weaknesses, enabling them to move optimally under any circumstances.

Both were cautious by nature and also among Yuder’s closest comrades. He had decided that today, when he needed to bring the smallest group possible, there were no better candidates.

Subsequently, Kishiar headed for the palace alone, while Yuder, under the guise of a secret mission to assist in palace security, called for Kanna and Gakane. They rode the carriage at a later hour, taking extra precautions to prevent any information leaks.

As Yuder had anticipated, both refrained from asking questions beyond what was to happen here and silently followed him. Their eyes blinked in tense alertness, clearly sensing that the atmosphere in the palace was unusual, but they weren't so unnerved as to be unable to carry out their mission.

'They've certainly become much calmer with experience.'

Both had increased remarkably in composure and cool-headedness since their entrance tests, which proved their training and missions had not been in vain.

Their path was quieter than ever before, yet Yuder keenly sensed that the number of hidden guards throughout the palace had multiplied several times.

'Kanna and Gakane might not sense this yet, but give them a few years and they will be fully capable of it.'

Not even considering the possibility they couldn't, he thought that if they couldn't, then he would simply train them until they could.

In this state, pondering future training plans, they walked for some time until the chief attendant stopped and turned around.

"Both of you are responsible for monitoring all who pass from here. No visitor can go the right way without passing this point. Subdue them immediately if you find anyone suspicious. Now, Baron Aile, this way please."

Yuder slightly turned his head toward Kanna and Gakane. With tense faces, they cautiously nodded their acknowledgment.

“You both have different duties from us, right? Do well, Yuder.”

“Nothing seems odd here so far. If anything does, I’ll act according to what I’ve been told. Then Yuder can complete the mission, and we can catch up later.”

“…Alright.”

The place Yuder headed to after distancing from the two was Emperor Keilusa’s officea place he had visited for the third time. Yuder looked up at the towering figure waiting before the closed office doors.

Kishiar, who had reached the Sun Palace ahead of Yuder, squinted his eyes and smiled at him.

“You timed it well. I’ve been waiting.”

“Why are you waiting out here instead of inside?”

“It’s because of the conditions we conveyed in advance. His Majesty agreed, but I figured seeing my face might disturb his peace even before we begin the treatment. So, I thought it best to wait out here.”

“Hmm”

Conditions. Yuder, already aware of what they were, glanced at the door and nodded his understanding.

The chief attendant who had guided Yuder thus far sighed softly, looking at the effervescent Kishiar.

“…You may not know how much His Majesty has been worrying about these conditions.”

“I heard you went through great lengths to persuade him. Thank you, Yuliver.”

Kishiar responded in a light tone, graced by a smile.

“If everything concludes successfully, you’ll find that your efforts were not in vain. I promise.”

“You really never change.”

“Never change? Do you know how much I’ve changed? Saying that will make my assistant feel slighted.”

””

Unaware of what could have slighted him, Yuder maintained a reserved silence. Fortunately, the chief attendant did not extend the conversation further and opened the door.

Within the office, now familiar on his third visit, were Emperor Keilusa and one other person already seated.

“You’ve finally arrived.”

A person not initially scheduled to be there that day, the Empress, greeted them with a faint smile because of Kishiar’s request.

Empress Rosa Faria La Orr. She was the last ‘condition’ that Kishiar and Yuder had prepared.

Yuder remembered the serious conversation he had with Kishiar the day after concluding that the subject’s will and wishes could affect the Awakening conditions.

“I’ve thought about it. No matter how well we prepare, the extent to which we can elevate His Majestys wishes has its limits.”

“If we want more than what we have now, that’s true.”

“But isnt the point to offer something that will make His Majesty desperately want to live through the power of Awakening?”

“Is there another way?”

“We should call for the Empress.”

“Excuse me?”

“Instead of living in the same palace but never seeing each other, they should be together from the start.”

That would certainly sway the Emperor’s emotions significantly in one direction or another. But whether the Emperor’s feelings would align with their hopes upon seeing the Empress was uncertain. To that concern, Kishiar only offered a secretive smile.

“I thought about that all night. There is a way.”

What that ‘way’ was, Yuder only understood upon seeing the Empress.

Dressed in soft-colored attire, the Empress had let her hair down, not appearing as the dignified noblewoman she usually was, but rather like an untainted, refreshing young lady.

“No, she doesn’t just look like a young lady She is actually wearing the kind of dress that unmarried noble young women wear.”

The Empress, who had undergone a complete transformation, seemed slightly uncomfortable in her new attire, yet she did not lose her poise. Her eyes were filled with unwavering hope, as if she could achieve anything for the success of the day ahead.

Beside her, Emperor Keilusa quietly observed her without uttering a word.

Even as Kishiar and Yuder entered the scene, the Emperor barely shifted his gaze. His eyes seemed half-entranced by something, while the other half were sunk in complex emotions.

“Do you think this attire suits what the Duke conveyed? I don’t know why, but he insisted my presence here would contribute to today’s event,” the Empress immediately inquired upon receiving the greeting, to which Kishiar confidently nodded.

“Yes, it’s perfect. Anyone who lays eyes on Your Majesty today will understand what the beauty of dawn that dispels darkness is.”

“Duke, I didn’t invite you here just to hear such words,” the Emperor finally turned his head and curtly cut off his brother.

“To be honest, I have no clue how this situation contributes to healing. It would be difficult to accept any further action from the Empress.”

“Please set aside such concerns. Her Majesty only needs to observe the situation freely by our side as things progress.”

“What exactly…”

The Emperor, seemingly puzzled, sighed and rubbed his eyes. A long sigh flowed through his parched lips.

“Is there anything else needed or prepared?”

“No, everything is ready.”

“Good. Then let us begin without delay.”

The Emperor rose from his seat with composure. The atmosphere, which had been somewhat relaxed, instantly became ordered, and everyone moved smoothly. The Emperor lay down on the meticulously arranged bed prepared for today, and Yuder stood with Kishiar at opposite sides of the bed. Near the head of the bed was a servant with a bowl of hot steaming water and a wet towel, and a little further away stood the Empress, watching over all of it alone.

A seemingly insignificant bedroom for an operation intended to save the life of the Emperor who ruled the empire. Only four people were present for the Emperor.

However, Yuder felt no sense of inadequacy.

Lifting his gaze and taking a deep breath, he met the swirling crimson eyes also looking at him.

Beneath that seemingly carefree smile, only Yuder could feel the deep, age-old agonies that rippled like an endless sea.

‘…I will succeed.’

Strengthening his resolve, Yuder finally removed his gloves with force.

“Let us begin.”

Underneath his pale hand, where the crimson veins writhed as if alive, the wind began to blow.

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Chapter 549

The atmosphere in the Sun Palace had been anything but normal lately.

It was not long ago that such whispers reached the ears of Duke Diarca.

Initially, the Duke thought these rumblings to be an auspicious sign he had long awaited. The Emperor, who had secluded himself due to illness and didn't wish to reveal his deteriorating condition to anyone, was perhaps nearing his end. Though the Crown Prince's condition was not exactly promising, Duke Diarca felt that regardless, the course of the world would not deviate from the plans set forth by his house. It was a rational assessment, based on a long-standing observation of the palace's various eyes and ears.

However, his hopes were shattered when the Cavalry returned from the west and the Emperor emerged from his seclusion for the first time in years.

To the astonishment of the unwitting commoners, the Emperor looked reasonably well as he openly praised the returning Cavalry. Even more surprising, he brazenly wielded his authority, appearing with an entourage that included the Grand General and the Head of the Court Mages. Watching the Emperor and Empress return, after publicly lauding the Cavalry and elevating his brothers reputation, Duke Diarca couldn't muster even a sarcastic laugh.

True, the Duke had suspected he was placing false hopes on his brother and the Cavalry since its inception. Thus, he could come to terms with the ostentatious display. But only once.

The recent monster anomalies in the West have been exceptional incidents. It was the first time something like that had

happened, and it was the first time that Duke Tain, who was so crazy about gambling that he could not afford to solve the problem himself, had brought them in. It was mere luck, not something to expect a second time around, that the Cavalry had identified and resolved the issue.

What difference did luck-made outcomes have from meaningless victories in gambling? Real victories were reserved for those who had patiently bided their time and prepared. They were not something that could be had by fools who stumbled into power by luck.

Yet, it seemed the Cavalry and Duke Peletta himself didn't share this viewpoint. At the gauche party reeking of vulgarity, they did not hesitate to provoke Duke Diarca.

After that damned party, Duke Diarca lost several confidants, including the always-obedient Baron Durmand. He even went to the extent of making sweeping changes among his inner circle, to deter any erroneous thinking about the Diarca family. Although it was something he was planning to do sooner or later, the fact that he was forced into it made it particularly disagreeable.

Still, amidst his frustration and anger, the Duke did what needed to be done based on his previous experiences. He maximally utilized the lessons learned from the party. Knowing that the awakened commoners were fiercely loyal to those who recognized their value, he decided to replace the worthless men around him with Awakeners hed never paid attention to before. As a first step, he finally sent reliable eyes and ears into the Cavalry, which he had ignored until now.

However, this motley crew, not even a year old, gave not an iota of attention to the people sent by Duke Diarca. It wasn't that they were satisfied with their current group, but they weren't easily swayed by money or prestige either. On the contrary, they regarded

the people sent from Diarca with suspicion, making repeated attempts to discern their true identities, which in turn unnerved the Duke's messengers.

"Your Grace. I apologize, but the arrogance of those commoners surpasses all imagination. Given their inflated sense of importance, they're unlikely to accept our proposal at this juncture. May I suggest we wait for a better opportunity? Human greed knows no bounds, and these lowly beings will not know their place. Time will provide the answer to all."

The first plan, which aimed to buy off members of the Cavalry to act as eyes and ears within it, had failed. Duke Diarca regretted not planting his agents when the Cavalry was initially formed. However, he reasoned that new members would eventually be recruited. If these men had any sense, they would soon realize that they'd joined a rotten corps.

Instead, Duke Diarca started to fill his ranks with other Awakeners. Though not entirely pleased, he comforted himself with the thought that nothing in the world progresses perfectly in one go.

Patience never betrays. Even the Duke's irresponsible youngest son, Kiolle, had finally matured enough to act like a proper human being. Or so the Duke thought, unaware of the truth about his 'finally matured' youngest son. Duke Diarca was unconcerned with the details.

After the Diarca party, he planted even more eyes and ears around the Emperor, Empress, and the Cavalry. Those he had left alone, thinking they would fail on their own, had started to regain their vitality. He could not afford to ignore this any longer.

Soon, new shifts in the atmosphere that he had previously overlooked began to filter through to him. Duke Peletta, who had always been a wastrel and frequented all manner of parties, was now reportedly engrossed in training exercises with his Cavalry.

Reports came in that the commoners' faith in him grew significantly when his new sword was verified to be genuine.

The Emperor, who was thought to be ineffectively hanging around the nobility and occasionally losing his temper, had recently started inviting several people into the palace. Even more shocking was the unreliable information suggesting a close correspondence between the Sun Palace and the upper echelons of Nelarn.

The Empress, usually so meek in social gatherings, was unexpectedly in frequent contact with her family, the House of Herne. Particularly concerning was her communication with the first and the second child of the Herne family, who were the most likely candidates to become the next Duke of Herne. This gave Duke Diarca an unsettling feeling.

It was the sensation of danger, a feeling that had dulled from years of living in victory and peace.

Could it be that the absence of any action from the Herne family in the recent tragic events involving the Apeto and Tain families was due to some conversations between the Empress and the Emperor?

It was an unknown. However, just the thought that such a possibility might exist filled Duke Diarca with discomfort. He had always assumed he had an intimate understanding of these matters.

When had these people started moving beyond his field of vision?

Why did he only hear of these developments now?

"Your Grace. Please forgive the sudden intrusion into your chamber. Urgent matters have arisen. Last night, individuals sneaked into the Sun Palace through a secret passageway. While unconfirmed, we've heard that they may be Duke Peletta and Baron Aile…"

At that moment, several days ago, Duke Diarca's displeasure reached its peak upon hearing this report.

"The atmosphere in the Dawn Palace also seems different from before. It's difficult to confirm precisely since one of our spies was discovered and expelled, but something is clearly being prepared in the Sun Palace."

"Could it be that Duke Peletta has finally found a way to cure the Emperor's chronic illness?"

"Preposterous… Is such a thing even possible?"

"Wasn't Duke Peletta the one who has met and investigated the most Awakeners in the Empire? Consider the Red Stone, of which we've heard nothing since it was retrieved by the Cavalry. If it wasn't useless…"

A chilling speculation, but worth investigating nonetheless.

Only then did Duke Diarca remember Thais Yulman, an elder of the Pearl Tower, whom he had disregarded after hearing news about the Red Stone's retrieval. He sent someone to make contact. But the old mage they had counted on was long gone, leaving behind only some luggage. Contact had been lost for several months, and few people knew where the mage had gone.

The Duke's men were quite flustered. Not knowing that an elder of the Pearl Tower had disappeared was a significant oversight that would surely bring disgrace upon the whole tower.

They believed that finding the old mage before reporting back would be the best way to avoid the Duke's wrath. They had not considered that he might be among the Cavalry, so the progress was agonizingly slow.

Had they contacted the Pearl Tower in time, they could have heard about the well-being of the missing old mage, but caution sometimes leads to undesirable outcomes.

In the midst of this disarray, Duke Diarca received another report.

Clear information had arrived that the Sun Palace was preparing to host guests yet again tomorrow.

The specifics were still unclear. But from the time when the Empress Dowager Inella La Orr, of Diarca origin, was in good health, Duke Diarca had never been at ease with the current Emperor and his brother.

“Whether confirmed or not, the conclusion will be the same.”

He had no intention of scattering ashes on a job he considered finished.

Determined to find out what was happening at the Sun Palace, the Duke quietly gave his orders to those guarding him.

“Prepare for a visit to the Sun Palace tomorrow.”

“Should we not also inform His Highness, the Crown Prince in the Bright Palace?”

“Leave him be. And don’t say a word to Kiolle either. Instead, get in touch with the ‘healers’ who frequent the Bright Palace.”

If they planned to use the power of the Awakener to sustain themselves, then he could counter them with the same power.

Duke Diarca decided to fully exploit their abilities and issued the orders. Not long after, a report arrived saying that the healers had agreed to cooperate.

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Chapter 550

Whoosh

“The Emperor’s inner realm is now open.”

A gentle breeze filled the room, lightly rustling everyone’s hair and the thin curtains half-shrouding the bed. Yuder gazed at the beautiful array of light manifesting over Emperor Keilusa’s body, exhaling softly after confirming that the inner realm was open.

It felt easier and faster compared to before. The change in the direction of the will glimpsed in the Emperor’s eyes seemed to have a significant impact.

Yuder surveyed the inner realm, which looked much the same as before. He concluded that the condition of the vessel was slightly worse than three days ago. Whenever the vessel failed to contain the inner power properly, all the flows of light scattered throughout the body trembled erratically, as though they would burst out. As this happened, the Emperor clenched his parched lips and exhaled painfully.

Despite the veins popping on his forehead and neck from the pain, the Emperor managed to endure it without a single groan. Whenever cold sweat formed on his face and neck, the chief attendant approached and gently wiped it away with a warm, damp towel. The Emperor breathed shallowly, as if clinging to each breath.

Yuder waited until the Emperor seemed to calm down before speaking. “Are you alright, Your Majesty?”

“Indeed… It’s less shocking the second time around,” the Emperor muttered, staring at one of Yuder’s eyes, which had turned golden.

“As I mentioned before, I will now start collecting the red power scattered within your inner realm.”

Yuder and Kishiar had anticipated that this would be the most time-consuming part of the process. After explaining this, Yuder turned his head towards Kishiar. Rolling up his sleeve, the man who had been sitting opposite flashed a relaxed and slightly mischievous smilea smile that betrayed no tension.

“Your Majesty, I will now join this process as well. It may hurt a bit, but if you could bear with it, that would be much appreciated.”

“Do you think I can’t endure the pain?” the Emperor asked slowly.

“Not at all. What you must endure is not the pain itself but rather the thoughts that try to keep you shackled to that pain,” Kishiar said.

“Thoughts that keep me shackled?”

“Based on what my assistant has discovered, the most important factor for becoming an Awakener and gaining new powers is a strong desire and will,” Kishiar continued.

Placing both his hands on the Emperor’s body, Kishiar overlaid them slightly over Yuder’s fingertips. A cold warmth emanated from Kishiar’s long, large hands.

“From this moment, please focus only on one thing,” Kishiar said, signaling to Yuder without specifying what that ‘one thing’ was.

“Proceed.”

Kishiar fully grasped Yuder’s hand. Taking a deep breath, Yuder closed his eyes. The surrounding air rippled anew, centering around Kishiar, as a tingling sensation sprang up inside Yuder’s eyes. Through their connected hands, Yuder felt a peculiar sensationa

wave of energy similar to what he had felt before was surging into him.

The connection between the two was now being intentionally activated again through Kishiar’s power.

“…What in the world…”

A soft murmur came from the Empress, but it sounded as if it were coming from somewhere far away.

A colossal force brushed against something that had been dormant within Yuder. Immediately afterward, a sensation as though an unknowable power was pulling that something tugged at him. His entire body felt like it was being sucked into a void, inducing a dizzying vertigo.

The feeling was as if something within him, that he was normally unaware of, was forcibly dragged to the surface.

It was unfamiliar and frightening. Yet through several experiences, Yuder had come to vaguely understand what it was. Opening his eyes, he clenched Kishiar’s hand tightly and found himself in a world completely transformed from before.

Between them, several strands of light intertwined, floating mysteriously as if unaffected by gravity.

These fragile threads, woven as finely as light itself, were not only around their bodies but between their interlocked hands and even within their eyes.

Kishiar slowly opened his mouth beyond their locked gazes.

“Do you feel it?”

“Yes.”

“I’ve also seen it. I’ve tried to activate it as weakly as possible compared to before. But we mustn’t focus too much on this phenomenon; we have important work to do.”

“I understand.”

Kishiar offered a faint smile. Perhaps because they were connected, that smile felt like a powerful wave to Yuder. At the same time, a scent unique to Kishiar enveloped him like a thin cloth, leaving no gaps.

‘Ah’

His racing heart found strange comfort in that firm grounding, quickly regaining composure.

Yuder then looked down towards the Emperor, regaining his focus. Although only a brief moment had passed, it felt like an eternity.

“We will now search for the red energy within.”

Yuder’s hand began to slowly move upward, tracing the Emperor’s body, before descending once more. Following the movement of his hand, the red energy within his palm began to ripple subtly.

It was the beginning of an attempt to locate the same type of energy within the Emperor using the pure Red Stone’s power that Yuder possessed.

‘If the Emperor has the Red Stone’s power within him, that power will undoubtedly be drawn to this pure energy.’

From previous experiences, Yuder knew he could move the red energy within an Awakener. If the Emperor had absorbed that power, even if he was not awakened, he would certainly react here.

He had clearly sensed red energy here before.

He needed to prove now that it was neither an illusion nor a misperception.

Whoosh

As the red energy moved according to Yuder's will, sweeping through the Emperor's body, the entangled energies within were disturbed, swirling erratically. However, when Kishiar's hand followed Yuder's, releasing a formless, whirlpool-like aura, the disturbed energies calmed and settled into place or stopped moving altogether.

Kishiar was reducing any potential shock the Emperor might feel, sensitively pulling or pushing the flow of energy within him, connected as he was to Yuder's senses and vision.

With their actions, the Emperor's breathing accelerated and then halted, repeating this cycle. Silently sitting beside him, the Empress's clenching hands tightened further. The chief attendant also looked on, unable to breathe properly, mesmerized by the surreal spectacle of energy flows moving as if with the wind.

As all eyes turned toward Yuder's hands and face, he began to release increasingly more energy from his hands while rapidly moving his eyes from side to side.

"Not here. Not here either Let's go a bit deeper"

"!"

Emperor suddenly jolted.

"Your Majesty!"

The chief attendant quickly gripped the Emperor's shoulder to steady him. However, Yuder was too preoccupied to notice, his focus

sharply drawn to the fleeting afterimage of a red light he had just glimpsed.

“It’s there.”

“Yes. We’ve found it.”

The man who had sensed what Yuder saw through their connection nodded quickly.

“Proceed, I will help draw it out.”

Energy enveloped Yuder’s hand as it once again delved into the Emperor’s being. At the same time, Kishiar, without missing a beat, exerted his strength to pull the twinkling shards of red light together.

The Emperor stirred once more, causing the bed to creak. Yet neither Kishiar nor Yuder halted. They continued to comb through the Emperors entire body in the same fashion.

‘Just as we suspected; it’s all scattered.’

Though it was deeper and more fragmented than they had initially thought, once they started looking, it began to come out in a chain. Yuder felt an odd sense of satisfaction knowing that his and Kishiar’s predictions were accurate, and he concentrated his power flawlessly toward the red energies scattered throughout the Emperor’s body.

Led by a pure force, red light sparkled from within the Emperor. Kishiar immediately used his ability to gather them together. From the Emperor’s abdomen to his upper body, and then from his arms to his head and back down to his legs, the mass of red energy they collected began to grow, as if rolling up a snowball.

‘So far, so good.’

Yuder assessed the situation while glancing at the long, pale fingers that followed his movements. Kishiar was, astonishingly, controlling his abilities so perfectly that it was hard to believe this was his first time doing something like this. Both their faces were drenched in sweat, but it was nothing compared to the pain the Emperor must have been feeling.

‘Hes holding up remarkably well’

Every time a bit of his energy was drawn out, the Emperor seemed to experience a ripping agony, pausing in his movements. Yet, he never let out a moan. Instead, his strained gaze remained locked onto his sweat-drenched younger brother’s face and behind him, the Empress who had been muttering prayers all along.

‘If it continues like this’

They might be able to move on to the next phase without any major issues.

That’s what he thought, when

Thud

A heavy resonance was felt from somewhere beyond the closed door.

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Chapter 551

“Gakane, are you worried about what Yuder might be doing inside?”

Hidden under a veil of darkness conjured by his shadow clone, Gakane abruptly turned his head at the sound of Kanna’s unexpected words.

“Huh? What?”

“You’ve been staring at the path leading inward, looking lost in thought. Even without asking, it’s obvious you’re concerned.”

There was no hint of scolding in Kanna’s softly whispered words, as she gazed at her comrade. Exhaling a sigh, Gakane cracked a smile.

“Yes You’re right. Whatever he’s up to, if he’s come this far, it must be a highly important task. I can’t help but be a little worried.”

“It’s only natural. No one knows better than we do how careless Yuder can be with himself. I’m also really worried.”

Their mission was to protect the Sun Palace. They knew very well they shouldn’t divert their focus to other matters, yet it was impossible to completely erase concern for their comrade. Gakane felt a mix of shame that his weakness had been so easily spotted and relief that his companion was the considerate and tight-lipped Kanna.

“But it’ll be fine. It’s Yuder, after all.”

“Yes you’re right.”

Both of them found themselves visualizing Yuder's face. In their Cavalry, his name had become a symbol of absolute trust. Everyone believed that if Yuder took the lead on something, failure was not an option.

And they also felt a sense of pride that Yuder had sought their help in such a situation.

"So, let's focus on what we're here to do. It won't do to get distracted and overlook something important."

"Haha True. Speaking of which, I should detach a portion of my shadow clone to scout the surrounding area."

Gakane awkwardly maneuvered his hand, causing a part of the shadow covering the floor of the dimly lit corridor to shake and detach, standing before them. Kanna exclaimed in awe.

"Wow, so you can do something like this now? That's amazing."

"No, it's not that impressive. Not when you consider how much you and the others have progressed."

Scratching his head, Gakane suddenly paused and turned. An inexplicable sense of unease emanated from the silent darkness beyond.

"Gakane? What's wrong?"

"I thought I heard something. Didn't you?"

"What sound? I didn't hear anything."

"It's a strange feeling Can you use your ability to check what's happening outside, Kanna?"

"I'll try through the wall."

Kanna touched the wall beside her. But just as she closed her eyes to activate her ability, hurried footsteps echoed from the far end of the corridor.

Instantly, Gakane sent Kanna behind him and stepped forward, expanding the size of the shadow clone that enveloped them. Almost simultaneously, the owner of the footsteps came into view. A bloodied young servant stumbled forward, shouting.

“Emergency! Emergency! Intruders are outside! The knights have been attacked! Take me to the chief attendant at once!”

“What?”

Both Gakane and Kanna widened their eyes in disbelief. Gakane quickly retracted his shadow clone and approached the man.

“What happened?”

“I don’t know Intruders The knights have been attacked”

The man continued to shake, his eyes vacant and unfocused. To reassure him, Gakane moved a bit closer.

“We’re just temporary guards. But intruders? Where did they appear from?”

“I don’t know. Let me see the chief attendant!”

At that moment, Gakane’s fingers, which were about to move reflexively, flinched. Alongside, Kanna firmly grabbed the hem of his garment. Her other hand was leaning on the wall.

“Kanna?”

“That person is strange.”

“What?”

“I just read information through the wall. There are many knights hiding here besides us. But now… I can’t read any information from them. And I can’t sense anything from that person either.”

“Ah… really?”

“Huh?”

This time, it was Kanna who looked surprised.

“The chief attendant explicitly said not to let anyone pass this point. If that man works under such a figure, he would have received emergency instructions to report through another means, just like us. Yet, he insists on seeing the chief attendant…”

Gakane furrowed his brows and scanned the man up and down.

“…Don’t you find it odd that he keeps repeating the same thing?”

“Indeed.”

As their eyes met and they concurred about the eerie peculiarity of the situation, the bloodied attendant suddenly shouted, “Let me see the chief attendant!”

“Sorry, but that’s not possible. Stand back, Kanna. I’ll restrain him.”

“Okay.”

As Kanna drew her dagger and took a few steps back, a shadow clone burst forth from Gakane. With a formidable punch, it sent the bloodied attendant flying down the corridor.

“Argh!”

The flying attendant writhed on the ground but couldn’t get up. Yet, moments later, a red blob suddenly shot out of his gaping

mouth, flying toward Gakane like light.

“…What is that?”

Gakane instinctively expanded his shadow to block it. His body moved ahead of his thoughts, thanks to his rigorous training.

A loud noise reverberated as if something had collided and exploded against the shadow clone. The ensuing shockwave shook the entire floor. Gakane rolled back a few times, barely regaining his posture with a cough.

“Gakane!”

“I’m fine. Are you?”

“I’m okay too! But what was that just now?”

“I have no idea. He spat it out when I knocked him down… Did he lose his mind?”

“Seems so. I’ll read him again.”

Gakane used his shadow clone to restrain the man and dragged him closer. Kanna touched the man’s blood-stained clothes and activated her ability.

“Are you getting any readings now?”

“Yes, now I can read… Wait a minute…”

Kanna’s eyelids trembled. A moment later, a gasp of shock escaped her lips.

“This man is a genuine attendant!”

“What?”

“He had run out to investigate the intruders we were warned about earlier. But then someone he was helping spat out a red blob just like the one we saw…”

Before Kanna could finish, she suddenly lifted her head. More footsteps were approaching from the direction she had turned to look.

“Intruder”

“An intruder!”

“We must see the chief attendant”

Over ten individuals appeared, dragging their feet. Like the attendant they had knocked out, they were all muttering similar phrases. Their eyes were vacant, unfocused. Moreover

“It seems we have actual knights among them this time,” Kanna murmured, her face pale but composed. Among the staggering figures approaching them, several were clad in armor, and others wielded swords.

“Kanna, do you think these people are being controlled by someone?”

“It’s likely. Remember that thing we saw earlier? It probably does this to them.”

“It’s odd that we can’t hear anything from outside in a situation like this. And while there should be other knights besides us, none have shown up… Magic can’t be the cause.”

“It’s the work of Awakeners. There’s no doubt about it.”

Both were certain that more than one individual was involved. A glance between them was enough to confirm their shared conviction.

“We may not know who they are, but one thing is certain: they aren’t infiltrating the imperial palace with good intentions. Let’s stop them all and find out who’s behind this. They can’t be far.”

“I’ll read the information, locate the Awakeners, and send a signal to Yuder’s side. I’m not sure if it will reach him under these circumstances, but”

“Understood.”

“Be careful, Gakane! Those people are real servants and knights.”

“Don’t worry.”

Relying solely on swordsmanship would make it difficult to counter the multiple palace knights with years of experience. But Gakane had always had a shadow to steadfastly protect him.

‘Incapacitating them without killing will be difficult. However… it oddly doesn’t seem impossible.’

Gakane briefly glanced at Kanna, who was leaning against a wall with her eyes closed, before drawing his sword. Simultaneously, shadow clones arose around him. It was at this moment, as he was sizing up his staggering foes and tensing every muscle in his body, that

“…So, you’re here.”

A familiar voice unexpectedly echoed from the adjacent corridor. Startled, both quickly turned their heads to see a new face and simultaneously exclaimed, “Sir Zuckerman?”

“When did you get here?”

“I assure you, it’s really me. You don’t have to be so wary. I was here ahead of you to escort the Duke.”

Nathan Zuckerman casually flicked the blood off his sword. Both Kanna and Gakane watched the droplets fall, rendered speechless.

“I heard you two would be holding down the fort, which had me worried. But it appears there was no need for concern after all.”

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“I heard you two would be holding down the fort, which had me worried. But it appears there was no need for concern after all.”

With a single sweep of his gaze, Nathan Zuckerman seemed to have assessed the entire situation. Gakane and Kanna finally calmed their anxious hearts and shared the information they had gathered with the southern knight.

Upon hearing that the current events appeared to be instigated by unknown Awakeners, Nathan Zuckerman seemed unsurprised.

“I expected as much. Other knights who were with me have fallen to the same tactics.”

“Really?”

“Not all of them, but we’re short on time. Let’s discuss the details after we’ve sorted things out.”

Nathan Zuckerman stepped forward, lifting his sword. As he prepared to face multiple enemies, his expression remained utterly composed, betraying neither excitement nor tension. Gakane quickly followed him, shouting a warning.

“Sir Zuckerman, are you aware of the red blobs that burst out of these people once they’re subdued? You must avoid them. Be careful!”

“Yes, I know.”

As Nathan Zuckerman calmly responded, the figures who had lost their focus surged toward him all at once. While the low-level

minions were easily subdued by mere shadow clones, those wielding swords proved more challenging.

Gakane dispatched some of his shadows to protect Kanna, who was still reading information in the background. He wore multiple streams of shadows around his body like armor while brandishing his sword.

The shadow clones entwined around him would extend and twist freely, attacking enemies from all directions. At times, they spread out like a wall to protect him. Gakane maneuvered effortlessly through the incoming attacks, changing the tide of battle and launching relentless offensives. Although the explosions caused by the red blobs bursting from the fallen enemies made it difficult to maintain his stance, he managed to avoid any notable injuries.

Watching knights fall under the coordinated attack of his shadow clones and sword, Gakane felt a different kind of thrill than when he had hunted monsters in the West.

‘I have entered the imperial palace and I’m fighting and gaining the upper hand against the famed imperial knights…’

When he had first created his shadow clones, they could only mimic his movements. But after extensive training and improvements, they now moved freely, without needing to maintain a human-like shape.

He even had the leisure to entertain stray thoughts during the battle, amazed at how strong he had become. Gakane simultaneously directed his shadow clones and sword toward the third charging knight.

The moment the two blades clashed, his shadow clones elongated beneath him, rising from behind the opponent to strike down upon the knight’s head. Accompanied by a cracking sound, the

knight wavered for a moment before dropping his sword and collapsing onto the ground.

‘Ah… did I hit him too hard?’

Gakane suppressed his regret for the fallen knight and used his shadows to contain the erupting red blob.

-Boom…!

Another crashing noise reverberated, followed by a brief silence.

‘What’s next…’

Wiping away his sweat and turning around, Gakane halted his steps. Contrary to his expectations, he found that no one else remained in the area.

Having subdued more than a dozen opponents, Nathan Zuckerman slowly sheathed his sword. Unlike Gakane, who was panting heavily and visibly soiled from a hard-fought battle, Nathan remained as composed as ever.

“When did he…?”

Gakane’s eyes trembled slightly. He had no precise measure of Nathan’s true capabilities. This was the first time he had ever seen the man in direct combat. However, thanks to his own past efforts to become a knight, he knew Nathan’s skill was anything but ordinary.

He’s moved faster than me, faced more enemies, and yet he hasn’t even broken a sweat. There’s not even a hint of Aura’s fragment… Just how strong is he? And to think, a knight of his skill has been living unnoticed, as though a mere adjutant under our Commander?

Interrupting Gakane’s train of thought, Nathan finally spoke. “You don’t seem to be injured.”

“Ah, yes.”

“Let’s separate the weapons and tie up the unconscious. Can’t be too careful.”

“Ah, yes, understood!”

Briefly glancing aside, Gakane noticed that Kanna was still sweating profusely with her eyes closed, seemingly struggling to read something unknown. He left one of his shadow clones to protect her as he started to help Nathan tie up the fallen. Soon, he realized something new about the Southern knight: Nathan was astoundingly quick and precise, even in the mundane task of tying people up.

Why is he so good at this? How often does a knight have to tie people up? The more I know, the more nervous I get.

“Where I come from, battles often erupt for the same reason as now, with bloodied people begging for help,” Nathan said, dispassionately conversing while skillfully binding the hands and feet of an unconscious foe. “Even if we subdue the person being manipulated, if we fail to block the ejected red blobs they’ve swallowed, we instantly become new victims.”

Gakane snapped back to attention and nodded. “Ah, yes, that’s true.”

According to Nathan, even skilled knights found it difficult to act properly when faced with bizarre powers and when trusted allies suddenly turned against them. Internal confusion was substantial, especially since knights in leadership positions were also affected. However, Nathan had suspected the work of an Awakener and

stepped forward, suppressing those being manipulated before locking them in an empty room.

He then gathered the remaining people to completely seal off the second palace where they now stood. Gakane couldn't help but express his admiration.

"You're incredible."

"Both the Duke and His Majesty had predicted that something like this might happen," Nathan said. "The real issue is the temporary loss of manpower. However, I don't see that as particularly advantageous for the enemy."

"Ah, right. Since there are no more people left to control, the enemy is also at a disadvantage."

If only those who swallowed the red blob could be manipulated, then the enemy would also find it difficult to move freely in a situation where no such vulnerable individuals remained.

They probably started by controlling the weaker attendants to infiltrate us, planning to use them to exploit the knights' vulnerabilities and penetrate deeper into the palace, Gakane thought to himself.

The audacity of the plan was staggering, and it sent shivers down Gakane's spine to think how tremendously effective it had been. For the first time, Gakane fully grasped how vulnerable those who had never truly encountered an Awakener's abilities were, despite being an Awakener himself.

"The enemy appears to consist of at least two individuals. One with the ability to manipulate people, like we've just witnessed, and another who somehow manages to obstruct our senses, muffling noises and sensations from outside and within."

“Yes, Kanna and I had a similar theory. We are Awakeners, we should have been more vigilant in preparing ourselves. I apologize.”

“It’s alright. Even among Awakeners, it’s not as though you can instantly discern each other’s abilities. We have secured the area as instructed, so that’s enough.”

“Even if they can use their abilities from a distance, they can’t be too far away. We need to catch them before they realize what’s happening and flee.”

“In that case, the two of you stay here. I will conduct the search myself.”

Responding impassively, Nathan Zuckerman began to tie up the arms and legs of the remaining individual.

“Going alone is risky. At least wait until Kanna gathers some more information before moving”

“We already know who likely committed this act. Wasting time is not in our favor. It’s crucial to secure at least some evidence.”

Just as Nathan Zuckerman finished tying up the last person, Kanna’s eyes flew open, and she shouted, “This isn’t all! Outside! No, upward!”

“Kanna?”

Breaking out of the shadows, a sweating Kanna clenched her teeth as she ran out.

“I read the movements of all those who were controlled! The perpetrators are no longer here. The initial control started not with humans but with an animala bird!”

“A bird, you say?”

“Yes. So, this chaos is not their ultimate goal. They used this as an opportunity to determine the Emperor’s location and to figure out what’s happening inside”

At that moment, Nathan Zuckerman drew his sword again.

“We need to go up. Follow me.”

—

“What was that noise just now?”

“I suspect a rather noisy cat has entered.”

Kishiar responded to the Emperor’s weary query with a flick of his hand. Yuder, locking eyes with his piercing red gaze, was certain that Kishiar was thinking the same thing as himself at that moment.

‘Intruders.’

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“Intruders.”

Ever since they had increased the guards at the Sun Palace due to suspicions that information about their internal affairs might be leaking, they had anticipated something like this might happen. But there was a significant difference between mere anticipation and the tactile sensation of the event unfolding.

“Its clear who’s behind the intrusion, but the real issue is figuring out who they sent… The loud noises and tremors indicate it’s not a simple assassin.”

Before coming here, the last faces Yuder had seen were those of Gakane and Kanna. Though he knew they weren’t ones to be trifled with, the large tremors he had just heard couldn’t help but make him nervous.

It seemed Emperor Keilusa felt the same. Until just a moment ago, the internal situation had been relatively smooth, but now, it began to waver slightly.

“Your Majesty, I told you there would be a time when you must focus on only one thing. That time is now,” said Kishiar.

With Kishiar’s words, the internal flow within the Emperor regained its original steadiness. However, a moment later, the small sounds and tremors emanating irregularly from outside began to unsettle the atmosphere again.

Boom, bang. Each time a thunderous noise reverberated, followed by a tremor, the walls and bed shook, and the internal stability of the Emperor continued to waver.

What on earth is happening? Yuder furrowed his brow. He focused harder than ever, but the internal chaos within the Emperor made him miss the mark several times.

And then, at the peak of this chaos, the Empress stumbled and clung to her chair as an even louder noise and tremor spread.

“Ah”

“Empress!”

Lying down, the Emperor tried to move to call out to her in a strained voice, but his internal equilibrium went haywire. Yuders force started to be pushed back.

“Your Majesty!”

The chief attendant held down the Emperor, shouting.

The lustrous red energy that had been following the pure Red Stone’s power was swept away in a blink, and the energy that Kishiar had been painfully gathering also seemed ready to disperse. Yuder felt familiar pains in his eyes and somewhere within his body, as though his entire being was in flux.

Across from him, Kishiar had also paled dramatically. Drops of sweat trickled down his temple and nose, dropping below his chin like drops of blood. Seeing this, Yuder felt a spark in front of his eyes.

The threads connecting the two wavered; their link screamed.

“No.”

Yuder drew even more energy from himself to keep from losing his way, but the elusive red hues did not return. Unknowingly, his

pupils had turned a fearsome golden color as he drew a deep breath.

“Get a hold of yourself, Your Majesty!”

This couldn’t be where it all collapsed, but the Emperor showed no signs of regaining stability.

“Ugh ah”

Unable to overcome the pain, the Emperor clawed at the sheet. Blood oozed from between his broken nails, staining the fabric a dark red.

“Your Majesty!”

The Emperors glasses slipped off his sweat-soaked face. Yuder clenched his teeth as he saw the Emperor’s deep red eyes staring into some indeterminate void.

“At this rate”

He was not only unable to move on to the next phase but also on the verge of losing all the energy he had gathered so far.

What should he do?

Just then, while running through countless scenarios in his mind, Yuder suddenly felt a strong grip seize his hand.

…

Kishiar was watching him.

The moment Yuder met those unwavering eyes, seemingly untroubled despite being glazed over in a ghastly white, the rage that had been surging within him began to subside. The pain that felt as if it would burst through his eyes also started to ebb away.

It was only then that Yuder realized his own eyes had turned gold and were dripping blood. The blood that stained the sheet was not just that of Emperor Keilusa.

“It’s okay,” Kishiar whispered, his lips barely moving.

“Haven’t we been preparing for this moment?”

So, it’s okay to close your eyes for a moment.

With an irresistible command, the scent that enveloped Yuder shifted.

Without realizing it, Yuder’s eyes gently closed. At the same time, something hot once again trickled down from one eye.

“Your Highness, Empress!”

Beyond the darkened vision that forcefully shut off the power of his perception, a low, soft voice struck his ears more clearly than before.

“Come here, please hold His Majesty’s hand. Hurry.”

The Empress rushed over, panting, and tried to sit beside the Emperor to take his hand. However, the Emperor didn’t hold her hand. With fingertips stained in blood, he barely managed to brush the Empress’s hand aside. A murmuring slipped through Emperor Keilusa’s lips.

“Lea…ve. Dan…gerous. Go…away.”

“Your Majesty…”

He muttered, imploring her to leave and abandon him.

This was the earnestness of a man who hadn’t forgotten for a single moment that his proximity could be dangerous to those

around him, ever since the problem with the vessel arose.

“Kishiar, no. I must take the Empress and…”

“Your Majesty!”

Tears filled the Empress’s eyes. Her face contorted as though the world was falling apart, a suppressed sob shaking her throat. Yet she bit her lip and managed not to cry out loud.

Instead, her gaze turned to Kishiar, who was watching her.

Kishiar met her eyes with an unwavering stare, as if he knew she would look his way. He slowly parted his lips to whisper something to the Empress. His words didn’t register in her mind until moments later.

“Say whatever you wish. Tell me things that only you, as the Empress, can say. It’s okay to be angry, to resent.”

Leave the rest to me.

The Empress hesitated, uncertainty and wavering flickering through her eyes.

However, a moment later, she once again reached out to firmly grasp the Emperor’s hand. Desperately, earnestly. The hands she held were much more emaciated and withered than she remembered.

Composing her faltering expression, she finally spoke.

“Where do you expect me to go?”

From the lips of the Empress, pressed against the icy cold hands, came a soft voice.

“I’m not leaving. I will stay right here.”

“…”

“I won’t abandon you and flee like last time.”

“…”

“Didn’t you promise? That we’ll never face the dawn alone again. That we will lie side by side, holding hands, watching countless days break together. That it will be the family we create.”

Do you remember? The Empress murmured, her tear-soaked eyes and cheeks contrasting sharply against the Emperor’s fingertips holding her face. Slowly, she leaned in and pressed her trembling lips to his fingers, as if swallowing her sobs. At that moment, the Emperor’s fingertips trembled as if struck by lightning.

Gakane and Kanna sprinted after Nathan Zuckerman. As they climbed the stairs and passed through the corridor, an inexplicable mix of emotions and heat pounded in his head.

‘The intruders can control more than just humans…’

It was a fortunate thing that they had focused their attention outside in search of the puppeteer. If not for Kanna, who had forcefully extracted a wealth of information, they would have been caught off guard. Although Kanna was currently nosebleeding from the overload of information, her expression was intense and focused.

‘My head hurts, but it’s fine. Ive deciphered it.’

At first, Kanna had been taken aback that she couldn’t read the information from the one being controlled. However, in a state of urgent crisis, her abilities had surged to new heights. She had enveloped the entire palace, sucking in an overwhelming amount of data.

To be honest, she thought her head was going to explode for a moment. But the rigorous training she had recently undergone in blocking and sorting information came in handy. That time spent obsessing over her training had not been wasted.

Throughout their run, Kanna was simultaneously exerting her abilities and endlessly filtering and categorizing information. The walls she touched, the windows she passed, and even the airit all became a source of information, endlessly spewed forth by her abilities.

People who had passed through this place, their movements, words, and resulting thought patterns. Every single action of the people stationed in the palace was being mixed, sorted, and combined in her subconscious, delivering the correct answer to her in a time frame beyond human comprehension.

“Gakane, Zuckerman. Find an animal, a bird, or perhaps a ratsmall creatures that could slip through windows amidst the chaos. They must be here, somewhere close by.”

“Understood.”

“I got it.”

She had no intention of failing the mission entrusted to her.

‘Whoever it is, they won’t get past me. I’ll make sure of that.’

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She had no intention of failing the mission entrusted to her.

“No one’s getting past this point, no matter who they are. I’ll make sure of it.”

The lack of clear information on the awakened intruders was because they had meticulously hidden their true forms and infiltrated indirectly through manipulation.

At first, they had used small animals that anyone would let their guard down around. They successfully controlled a person through these animals, causing a domino effectlike a contagious diseasethat sowed chaos among those guarding the Sun Palace, allowing them to easily achieve their goal.

They probably wouldn’t have chosen this method had they known about Kanna, but it was clear that Kanna needed to employ a completely different method of reading to discover more about them.

She couldn’t bear itnot being of any help, especially when it was something well within her abilities, not something that pushed her physical limits.

I’ve really become a full-fledged member of the Cavalry, haven’t I?

But what was so odd about wanting to accomplish a task entrusted to her because she alone was deemed capable of doing it?

Kanna thought of the insignia of the Deputy Commander of the Cavalry that she treasured and kept close to her heart. Being true to

the Cavalry was nothing strange. It was, rather, something to be proud of.

Her formidable will surged within her, spreading even more widely in accordance with its master's will.

She needed to read further. Faster, more precisely, and gather more useful information. About the past, the present, and even what would happen in the future through all of it!

"Over there! Below that wall…!"

As Kanna sprinted and pointed to one side, Nathan Zuckerman immediately leaped forward, sword in hand, with an entirely different level of energy. He moved as if weightless, precisely skewering a small something that had tried to hide in the intricate walls and dark floor.

What was revealed beneath the blade was a single rat.

"Over there too!"

"Be careful, Adjutant Zuckerman!"

Following Kanna's direction, Gakane immediately dispatched a shadow to locate and kill another rat in the vicinity. Both rats expelled a red mist from their mouths just before dying, but no one present was fazed by it.

"Two rats. This can't be all of them."

"The rats are numerous and small, making them ideal for scouting. They probably haven't found the Emperor yet."

"Can you read the locations of all the scattered rats?"

"Questioning whether I can do it or not is meaningless at this point. Of course, I will."

Even as she panted for breath, not a single crack appeared in the resolve present in Kanna's voice. Nathan Zuckerman looked at the two Cavalry members, who had once anxiously followed him around like children, with newfound awe.

"Very well, proceed then. If you can pinpoint their locations, it's better for us to gather and eliminate them quickly rather than disperse."

"Yes. Now that we have a lead, I'll continue reading."

"Kanna! Before we go again, you're sweating a lot. Take this."

Gakane took advantage of a brief moment to hand Kanna a handkerchief, then surveyed their surroundings.

"Even if you locate the direction of the invading rats, they are too small and fast to chase down. From now on, instead of killing them, I'll focus on spreading my shadows widely to act like a net, blocking any escape routes."

"Killing and protecting you two will be my responsibility."

Roles were quickly and efficiently divided. Kanna rejected Gakane's offer to carry her if she got tired, stuffing a handkerchief into her nose as she yelled in a nasal voice, "Follow me!"

Meanwhile, the trio was chasing hidden intruders within the palace.

Several 'healers' had gathered in a guest room located in the most remote corner of Bright Palace, where the Crown Prince resided. They were staying overnight under the pretext that the Crown Prince's treatment was taking longer than expected, but this, of course, was an excuse.

Although they had entered the palace as healers, they were actually Awakeners. And tonight, they were obliged to do something different, acting upon a request from a high-ranking noble who had summoned them here.

The Awakeners sat in a circle, holding hands, their eyes closed as they twitched and occasionally moved their bodies significantly while continuing to use their abilities. Among them, one Awakener opened his eyes with a start, panting and frowning.

“Damn it. Can’t get a proper read on it. At first, it spread faster than I thought, but now it’s almost entirely vanished… I can’t really tell, but the ones we’re dealing with seem like they might be from the Cavalry.”

“How many are left?”

“Still over ten.”

“Isn’t that good enough? The important work is supposed to be done by Diemon, anyway. You just need to shake them up a bit and find the location.”

“Damn, but they’re too fast… Ah, we lost another one!”

One of the Awakeners complained with a scowling face and a cough.

Diemon, who had been sitting quietly with a timid face, turned his head as his name was mentioned. He wanted to join the conversation, but no one made eye contact with him. While he hesitated, the Awakeners had moved on to another topic.

“Juve. Is the barrier you planted still intact? How is it?”

“It’s fine as long as the object I infused my power into isn’t broken.”

“How are they finding us so well? Is it really the Cavalry?”

“No way. There’s no chance they knew we’d be involved. How could they?”

Uneasiness flickered among the Awakeners. As worry began to spread subtly, another Awakener raised his voice to shift the atmosphere.

“Look, we’re just doing what we were asked to do. No one knows we’re here. The Sage said this was necessary for all of us, so why wouldn’t we do it?”

“Well, that’s not… that’s not the point.”

“We could end up failing our mission, and everyone we’ve sent out could die.”

“The Sage must’ve thought of that, too. Just do as you’re told. Do you think opportunities like this come easily?”

“It’s easy for you to say when you’re not doing much…”

One of the grumbling Awakeners glanced towards the closed door.

“When exactly is the Sage returning? It seems like the conversation with the Crown Prince is taking too long.”

“The Sage was extremely pleased to be staying with the Crown Prince. It’s natural for their conversation to be lengthy.”

Just then, there was a knock on the door, and the person they had been waiting for finally appeared.

“I apologize for the delay.”

“Sage!”

“No need to apologize, Sage!”

As the Sage returned, the Awakeners regained their composure. With bright smiles, they collectively welcomed the Sage’s return.

The sage listened to the voices of those eagerly reporting the progress of their tasks and encouraged them with a warm tone.

“It’s alright. There is nothing wrong with the work you are doing. Even if you fail, it’s not your fault. As you have always done, I’m certain that you’ll achieve what you aim for this time as well. Trust in each other, and trust in yourselves.”

Hearing this voice that seemed to be a blend of all the warmth and trust in the world, the eyes of the Awakeners immediately softened. For a moment, they all forgot why they had been anxious just a minute ago.

The atmosphere among the Awakeners, now refocused on their tasks, had completely shifted.

“One of the objects containing sealing power has shattered. But there are still others remaining, so we should be fine.”

“I’ll channel more power.”

“Two more rats have died. But ah, I think I’ve figured it out. The location of the mysterious door they are guarding!”

The Awakener who was sensing the movements of the rats rapidly rolled his eyes behind closed lids and shouted with difficulty. The mood grew tense, but the Sage responded calmly.

“Well done. Now send a rat infused with the blood of a bird there. And Diemon.”

“…Yes.”

“Your turn. Are you ready?”

Diemon exhaled a shaky breath. He was caught between tremendous fear and exhilaration, knowing that the Sage had faith in him.

‘No matter how much the others belittle my abilities, calling them petty and akin to a petty thief, I am the chosen one in the end.’

“Yes. As long as the location is confirmed, I can send the ‘little bird’ that I’ve summoned to observe all that happens there.”

“Very good.”

The sage smiled at Diemon.

“Now! Burst the rat!”

As the shout of the one controlling the rat resounded, everyone in the room felt a minor explosion of energy.

Diemon also closed his eyes, summoning all his strength to fully utilize the ‘ability to control monsters’ that he had duplicated.

Keilusa La Orr abruptly regained consciousness amid faint darkness.

He realized, to his immense surprise, that the terrible pain that had tormented him for so long was no longer there.

‘Have I finally died?’

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Chapter 555

If this was death, it was nothing like what Keilusa had long envisioned.

The death he had imagined was never this serene or peaceful.

According to the hidden records of the imperial family, those born with cracked vessels endured horrifying pain. As their lives wore on, the intervals between their bouts of pain grew shorter. When death approached, they would lie in bed for days, unable to rise, suffering immense pain that no analgesic could alleviate.

There were records of them screaming in forms that could no longer be recognized as human, praying for the swift end to it all. Records of those who lost their minds from unbearable pain, becoming gibbering idiots. Records of those who, when even drugs failed to work, attacked the servants who brought the medication and tore at their own flesh like beasts.

Some had stabbed their own bellies and heads, laughing while doing so. A wet nurse had killed herself alongside the young princess when she found out the girl had a cracked vessel. Another young man had clenched his teeth and torn at his nails until they fell off, resembling an old man when he finally passed.

These accounts described a hell where one could think of nothing but death.

So, Keilusa had assumed his end wouldn’t be much different. The only distinction between himself and the others would be whether he had lived longer before the cracked vessel became too much. Either way, the end would be the same.

Clinging to a fragile life only for the body to ultimately shatter after the vessel completely broke, dying horribly without even leaving a corpse behind. The coffin would be filled with an intricately crafted dummy, and the reason for his death would be erased from history.

He would die a failure, achieving nothing by his own hands and leaving behind only pain for those who were dear to him.

‘…’

As bitterness swelled within him, his mind was instantly filled with thoughts of those precious people.

There was the kindly younger brother who didn’t bear a grudge even though he had taken the position once destined for him. Instead, the younger brother had expressed a wish to walk the same path with him, albeit in different places.

The old chief attendant, who had stayed by the Emperor’s side since the previous reign, worrying for an Emperor who was still too young and unsure to retire.

His parents, who were no longer with him but had taught him to never settle for reality.

And…

A young, headstrong girl he once thought could bear his child and carry on the future of the empire.

A certain woman who had shaken his heart like no one else had or would.

As he thought of that last person, Keilusa heard a sound like winter winds rustling barren branches.

He had known that woman since she was a girl wearing a dress that reflected the color of water, her cheeks flushed like a peach. Oblivious to the fact that he was the Crown Prince, she had awkwardly smiled while asking for advice on how to gracefully withdraw from the Crown Princess Candidate Test. Because of her smile, a stiff boy who had known nothing beyond books made the choice to hold someones hand and step out into the world. Through her touch, he realized just how green and expansive this world was.

How many flowers could actually bloom in what he had considered a dead imperial palace.

How grand the trees were and how many butterflies, bees, and birds took refuge in them.

How each dawn, which he thought was always the same, was actually so new.

Through her, he learned of the scents and the beauty of things that he had never realized were never the same twice.

Realizing that if she were gone, he would lose everything all over again, he clung to her with all his might. For the first time in his life, he had been selfish. He begged, he pleaded, and in the end, she took Keilusa’s hand.

In Keilusa La Orr’s life, she was the most beautiful girl. When they sat beside each other, it felt as if all the darkness in the world retreated, melting away.

Was this serenity the cost of never seeing her again? The moment the thought crossed his mind, he felt an immense pain erupting from an unknown place.

Even within the sanctuary he had longed for, Keilusa realized he wanted to see her face one more time than to bask in this tranquility.

Eyes that twinkled like a calm lake in the sunlight. Hair that was the color of ripe autumn wheat. Lips that were hesitant around people, but could smile more warmly than anyone else.

A face resilient as a flower that, despite being wounded and withering many times, blooms again the following year.

Ah, where could she be?

The last vision of her face was fading. She might have been crying, and he hadn’t been there to wipe her tears away. Was he destined to lose her in this darkness, unable even to recall her face, left only to yearn for her forever?

I don’t need such peace, he thought.

If he could see her once more.

If he could wipe away her flowing tears and tell her that he’s at peace now.

Just one more time…

Really, just once.

After that, she would find her own peace, and he could endure eternal suffering as the price.

It was at that moment.

“Your Majesty.”

He heard a voice.

A jolt of shock went through him. It was her, the woman he had been thinking of so fervently. She was calling out to him from somewhere.

Her voice trembled with sorrow and passion as it repeated, “Your Majesty, Your Majesty,” and then finally whispered another name.

“Keilusa.”

Ah, what was the point of staying in this serenity any longer?

If he couldn’t see her again, no sanctuary would have meaning for Keilusa.

With an earnest heart, Keilusa La Orr called out her name.

Not the awkward name that her adoptive parents had forced upon her, but the single name she was born with.

“Faria.”

At that moment, something changed within him.

An invisible seed of transformation instantly blossomed, overturning everything. Even the smallest particles making up his physical body were transformed into something new, as if sprouting from within. Keilusa groaned in tremendous pain.

He instinctively understood that some force was consolidating within him. Although he felt as if he was barely holding together, like tattered cloth, the awakened seed in his body didn’t block the pain but rather surged forward, amplifying it.

Shattered fragments came together. Unintelligible sounds pounded his ears like a torrential downpour.

Time and space became indistinguishable as eternity seemed to rush by.

“…”

“Your Majesty!”

The Emperor finally opened his eyes.

It was an inexplicable, mysterious moment.

Yuder reflexively opened his eyes again because of the Emperor’s body, which had begun to tremble at an accelerated pace from the moment the Empress’s lips touched his. What reflected in his eyes was something entirely different from what others were witnessing.

Kishiar had strained to keep the Emperor’s inner red energy from dissipating. But suddenly, it melted away like dissolving powder in water, spreading throughout his body, and then extinguished as if all light had been snuffed out. At first, Kishiar thought his perception had failed and tried to refocus his energy, but Yuder stopped him.

Kishiar’s red eyes reflected Yuder’s, which still shone with a golden light.

‘Is it a failure?’

Just as Kishiar involuntarily held his breath contemplating this, he shook his head.

“Can you hear it? The noises from outside have ceased.”

””

“It means those we’ve trusted to cover our backs have done their part.”

Yuder didn’t respond, but Kishiar quietly chuckled.

“So, we should do our part as well.”

“But I can’t see anything. If you are seeing something Don’t you understand?”

“Being unable to see could mean that the light is about to go out, but it could also mean that it’s about to come on. Initially, your ability to perceive energy within a person came from the power of the red stone, didn’t it?”

”””

“So, doesn’t it make sense to think that your sudden inability to see inside His Majesty might also be caused by the red stone? His Majesty is still breathing. He’s merely unconscious, which means he’s still alive.”

And if he’s still alive, anything is possible.

The wheels in Yuder’s tired and anxious mind stopped churning at these words. Finally, Yuder exhaled peacefully in front of the man wiping blood off his cheek.

And then, at that very moment

“Your Majesty!”

With the Empress’s cry, the Emperor’s fingertips twitched. As he groaned and took a deep breath, a light began to rise from within his relaxed body.

Yuder couldn’t take his eyes off the light. The reconstructed flow of light he saw now was entirely different from before.

“What is this?”

Beneath the Emperor’s abdomen, a clump of red light appeared that wasn’t there before. It was the red energy Kishiar had been holding onto. The ongoing red energy from within the body began to seep into that clump, and a faint light emanated from all over him.

Yuder realized he was witnessing the moment of someone undergoing an awakening.

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Chapter 556

Even without anyone saying it, one could sense that the Emperor’s body was undergoing changea change that diverged unexpectedly from predictions as soon as it was recognized.

Without a moments hesitation, Yuder shouted, “Commander, protect the Emperor’s vessel with your power!”

Kishiar’s ability involved pulling and pushing energies, and so, right after his own awakening, he could instinctively protect his vessel. However, the Emperor’s situation was different this time. His body was shaking more precariously than ever as it transformed under the flow of a mysterious power, becoming an Awakener.

This was not a favorable situation. If the Emperor’s vessel could not withstand this shaking during his awakening, it might just shatter, Yuder thought. To avoid such an ominous circumstance…

‘We must work together to protect the Emperor’s vessel by using Kishiar’s ability as soon as possible to attract some of the red energy that has begun to condense in the Emperor’s body.’

Although this diverged slightly from the original plan, the task was the same. A conviction that this moment could not be missed overwhelmed Yuder.

Simultaneously with Yuders shout, it seemed Kishiar had the same thought and began to exert his power. The connection between Yuder and him tightened, and the power began moving towards the Emperor’s vessel. As it did, blood started to flow anew from Yuder’s eyes.

Despite feeling as if the insides of his eyes were being shredded with a knife, Yuder remained unfazed and concentrated his utmost

effort.

However…

“The red energies in His Highness’ body are too resistant to being pulled together,” Kishiar murmured as he exerted even more of his ability. It was just as he said; despite the immense effort, the red energies inside the Emperor werent being pulled as smoothly as before.

Even if Kishiar was incredibly powerful, he was still human and had his limits. How long could he endure this, and could the Emperors unstable vessel withstand until he fully awakened?

‘No,’ Yuder decided calmly. Although time was of the essence and the situation perilous, Kishiars words helped him regain his composure. No more thoughts of failure. In that fleeting moment, Yuder sifted through every possibility and memory, finally stumbling upon something useful. Clinging onto this glimmer of hope, he spoke up immediately.

“Commander, stop forcing the Emperors internal energy for now.”

“And then?”

“Ill infuse him with some of my own pure energy. Weve successfully done this before, have we not?”

“…”

A faint furrow appeared between Kishiars brows, which had been exerting power continuously.

Of course, Yuder knew that the situation with Kishiar back then was entirely different from the Emperor’s current state. Despite the purity of the energy Yuder had absorbed, it wasn’t safe to assert that this would pose no risk to someone who was not only not awakened

but also had a cracked vessel, vulnerable even to the slightest disturbance.

Previously, they had not considered this method to expedite the Emperor’s awakening. However, the Emperor was in the process of becoming an Awakener, and there was a ‘connection’ active between Kishiar and Yuder that vividly transmitted both senses and emotions. It was worth taking the risk.

Kishiar seemed to have a good guess of what Yuder was thinking, yet he didn’t readily agree.

He must think it’s dangerous because I’m using too much of my power.

The fleeting emotions flowing through his eyes were clearer than ever, thanks to the shaky connection between the two.

But in this situation, I can’t just look out for my own safety.

Prioritizing my own safety could provide a moment’s respite, perhaps. But here and now, the one exerting more power and taking greater risks wasn’t Yuderit was Kishiar.

Kishiar had plunged into this peril, risking his recently regained health for his sibling. Excluding the Emperor, he had been the most stable pillar in an incredibly unstable situation. Even the Empress, the chief attendant, and finally, even Yuder had relied on his steadfastness; it was no exaggeration to say so.

Although he must’ve had a strong desire to save his family by any means, the man in front of him didn’t show it. Instead, he worried about Yuder, who had suggested a plan.

Who else should he act for, if not for this man? For him?

Not trying everything he could now would result in a lifetime of regret, far outweighing a moment's safety. Yuder wished, more intensely than ever, to achieve something for him.

Even if it meant draining all his remaining energy or bursting his eye, it didn't matter.

Within their exchanged glances, full of this resolve, a few seconds felt unbearably long.

"Will you be alright?"

Finally, Kishiar quietly asked. The short question carried myriad implications. Yuder sensed that Kishiar had read his emotions, and he nodded his head slowly, yet firmly.

"Yes."

"Understood. Let's do it together."

As if they had made a pact, both unleashed their powers simultaneously. Yuder recalled the time he had infused his pure energy into Kishiar and drew upon his power. A crimson vein rapidly spread across the back of his hand, snaking up to his neck and jaw. It felt as if fire, rather than blood, flowed beneath his skin.

The moment the red aura seeping from his fingertips coalesced, Kishiar's power precisely captured and pulled it. The two energies entwined smoothly, then burrowed into the Emperor's inner self.

The Emperor's body shuddered slightly. But the result that soon revealed itself was

"It worked."

Yuder watched his own pure energy, guided by Kishiar's hand, flow upwards through the Emperor's inner self. It easily glided over

the unstable vessel without mixing with the Emperor's other energies. The amount was too insignificant to even mention, but a success was still a success!

A wave of intense joy and relief brushed through his mind, yet it was only the beginning.

Yuder continued to send his power towards Kishiar. The drained energies were pulled and started to form a thin protective layer over Emperor Keilusa's unstable vessel.

"It's still… not enough."

The Emperor's vessel, caught in Kishiar's red aura, had regained some stability, yet it was still pulsating dangerously in sync with its heartbeat. More energy seemed necessary, but the limit was rapidly approaching.

Yuder's face had turned ashen, his concentration reaching an extreme level. Drops of nosebleed trickled down, as his trembling fingers sucked the energy out of him and his vision flickered in and out. Unbeknownst to him, he had almost collapsed; it was only when Kishiar grabbed and steadied him that he realized how close he had come.

"Yuder."

"Ah, I apologize."

"It can't go on like this."

"No, we can't stop now. The vessel is not yet complete."

"You're putting yourself at risk."

"No, I am"

Yuder’s gaze shifted to the almost completed Emperor’s vessel. It was radiating with red energy, similar to Kishiars. It was so close to being fully shielded that he couldn’t afford to stop now.

Yuder clenched his teeth in regret, thinking, if only I could harness the pure power of the red stone better, more efficiently.

‘Just a little more!’

Just a bit more power to save the Emperor and Kishiar.

Whooooo

That’s when it happened.

Yuder sensed a familiar yet new energy tapping into him. Looking around, he saw a red glow emanating from a basket on the Emperor’s desk not too far away.

Realizing what the mediums inside the basket could do, he shouted, “Commander! Please bring those stones over here!”

Kishiar immediately reached out. Driven by an invisible force, the stones flew from the overturned basket. Yuder caught one in mid-air, gripping it tightly.

As soon as he did, the red power inside the stone flared, absorbing into his palm like a bolt of hot lightning. Yuder, gasping for air, exclaimed, “These stones can amplify the power, and I can absorb it. Commander, you too, hurry”

The drained energy began replenishing, his body feeling as if it were set ablaze. Yet, it didnt feel painful. Yuder was relieved to see that even Kishiar, holding a similar stone, seemed far stronger than before.

The red energy that had drained them both finally completed the Emperor’s protective shield.

As the shield stabilized under Kishiar’s influence, the Emperors vessel solidified, signifying the Emperor’s transformation into an Awakener.

Yuder dumbly watched as Emperor Kailusas lips twitched and his eyelids began to flutter open.

This moment felt incredibly special, even to him who had changed so much in his previous life and the present.

Perhaps it was because of Kishiar, who was unable to take his eyes off the Emperors disheveled face, just like Yuder.

“Faria”

“Ah… Ahh”

With a cry that wasnt quite words, the Empress burst into tears, burying her face in the Emperors embrace. The chief attendant, guarding the door, fell to his knees, unable to lift his head before this miracle. The Emperor, with dazed eyes, looked at his wife and eventually moved his trembling fingers to embrace her.

Moments later, his gaze slowly shifted towards Kishiar and Yuder sitting on either side of him. His cracked lips twitched faintly. Although he made no sound, Yuder easily understood the word he wanted to say.

Thank you.

As if to celebrate the moment, a loud explosion echoed from somewhere outside the room.

And then there was silence.

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Chapter 557

Kanna, Gakane, and Nathan pursued and captured the rats at an unbelievably fast pace. It was natural that the two members of the Cavalry worked well together; they had trained in tandem for a long time. Added to this was Nathan Zuckerman’s exceptional skill, which knew no bounds, making their operation seamless.

Even in a complex environment, with just one signal from Kanna, Nathan Zuckerman managed to kill the small and fast enemy with a single stroke of his sword. His movements, targeting only the objective without destroying anything else, were so smooth that it made it all look trivial.

Moreover, although he wasnt an imperial guard of the palace, Nathan seemed incredibly familiar with its internal layout. There was no hint of condescension in his voice as he clearly guided them on which routes to take and which areas must be secured.

After dealing with most of the rats, they took a moment to catch their breath behind a bronze lion statue, which Nathan had identified as a crucial area. As Kanna was tracking the remaining rats, Gakane cautiously asked,

Is the place where Yuder is… alright?

Considering weve received no signal from the Duke, it should be fine, Nathan explained, implying that Kishiar had judged that they needn’t concern themselves with external matters.

Gakane felt both relieved and burdened, believing that they had more or less done a good job.

Yuder must be somewhere behind this area along with the Emperor and the Commander

They had been suddenly assigned to guard the Sun Palace without even being given detailed information. And Yuder seemed to be more deeply involved in this mission than ever.

The Sun Palace was the Emperor’s residence. Even without asking, it was obvious that the Emperor was the ultimate focus of today’s mission. The invaders would most likely be targeting wherever the Emperor was, and Yuders decision to go inside rather than remain outside was probably because it was deemed more critical and dangerous.

The appearance of invaders in the Sun Palace today had already confirmed that the choices made by the Emperor and the Commander were correct.

Kanna, is it getting difficult to chase the remaining rats?

They seem to have figured out what we’re trying to guard, and their speed is increasing. Its becoming hard to read them. Only a couple are left now.

It was natural that the enemy would also not just sit idly by. The rats were constantly trying to evade their pursuit and find something. However, Kanna was just quicker at reading them.

Don’t overdo it.

Mm-hmm.

As she murmured and shifted her downcast eyes this way and that, Kanna appeared almost entranced. It would have been a somewhat frightening sight to others, but Gakane was rather pleased.

Only those who have undergone the same awakening could understand the freedom and pleasure felt when a previously

unresponsive ability finally breaks through its limits. Knowing that Kanna was in that state, he didn’t want to disturb her.

The only concern was that with each use of her abilities, the handkerchief she used to block her nose was becoming increasingly stained. If it really became a problem, he planned to just knock her out.

After all, it’s just about searching for the rats… It may not be as fast as Kanna, but spreading my shadow as wide as possible should do the trick.

Theyll be coming this way soon!

Kanna lifted her head and pointed in one direction. Without hesitation, Gakane unfurled his shadow. In the blink of an eye, Nathan Zuckerman approached the area Kanna had indicated and skewered a rat that was just emerging from the darkness. The rat, even after being pierced, tried to escape, but failed to break through the gap sealed by Gakane’s shadow and was torn apart like a fish caught in a net.

“Keep running in the same direction! Don’t give them a chance to escape! It might look like one, but its actually two!”

Kanna sprang to her feet and ran. They located another rat attempting to sneak up the stairs from below. It was incredibly fast, almost as if it had been conserving all its energy for this very moment, escaping just before Gakane could close the gap with his shadow.

“Gakane, hurry!”

While Nathan Zuckerman killed one rat, before the second rat could scurry behind a bronze lion statue, Gakane mustered all his strength and expanded his shadow.

‘I’m not too late…’

Barely catching the rat’s tail, a pitch-black shadow surged upwards. Gakane immediately wrapped the rat in his shadow and shattered it.

‘Done. This is the end.’

So far, so good. They were also prepared to eliminate the red glow that usually emerged from the bodies of the dead rats.

But what flowed from the rat’s corpse wasn’t the red glow; it was dark liquid.

“…What?”

With a sound like an exploding ball, the blood splattered across the corridor. At the same time, Kanna’s eyes widened, and she screamed.

“Monster blood!”

“What?!”

“Its not the rat’s blood. The rat had ingested monster blood Theyve been targeting this location from the start A signal? Is that the meaning of the signal? If thats the case”

“Something is coming.”

As Kannas gaze darted erratically, she finally locked onto a window next to a statue. Nathan Zuckerman also turned his head towards the same spot.

At that moment, the moonlight streaming through the window began to be obscured by a dark shadow. It wasn’t due to clouds. Gakane noticed an unidentifiable black shadow outside the window, flapping its wings and staring at them.

‘What is that?’

The creature had disheveled fur and skin, like a bird freshly hatched from an egg. However, its wings were strong and large. The body was disproportionately small, but dozens of dark eyes were embedded all over it, each eye independently rolling to look in different directions.

An instinctual shiver ran down his spine upon realizing that those dozens of eyes were watching him. Such a creature couldn’t possibly be a normal, living beast.

It was a monster.

“Do you remember that creature from the monster manual we studied? Gakane?”

Kanna murmured softly.

“A monster that can locate its target regardless of darkness, walls, fog, or obstructions.”

With wings that spewed venom and long claws, its frail body was well-protected, and hundreds of eyes ensured it never lost sight of its target. It ate creatures smaller than itself, so smelling the blood of the same monster in front of it was like a taboo.

The image from the manual they had studied during training merged with the monster before them.

‘Its smaller than the one in the manual… but comparing it to a chicken or a pigeon would be an insult to those birds.’

“How could a monster be in the palace…”

“The important thing is to prevent that creature from entering and violating our territory!”

Kanna’s eyes bulged as she shouted.

“I can sense it. Theres another enemy behind that monster!”

“So you’re saying that monster is also being controlled, like the rats and the other knights?”

At Nathan Zuckerman’s inquiry, Kanna nodded her head, then hesitated a moment later.

“I can sense the presence of another Awakener, but it’s different from earlier! That monster just woke up from its egg because it smelled blood. And when we brought the egg here… I think it’s watching us through its eyes. I can read some information from its gaze.”

“More than anything, I’m certain that we need to find out what’s behind all this,” Nathan Zuckerman said as he took a deep breath and raised his sword.

“May I ask one more question? Are there other monsters besides this one?”

“No, I don’t think so. I can only feel… that creature.”

“Understood. Deputy Commander Wand, step back and read as much information as you can from that monster. I’ll take it from here.”

“It’s dangerous, Sir Zuckerman. I’ll help you!”

Gakane stepped forward, but Nathan Zuckerman shook his head.

“Guarding the area where the Deputy Commander Wand and the bronze statue are is far more important than attacking. It’s something that can’t be done with a sword, so I’ll leave that task to you.”

“But if you get a scratch and inflicted by its poison…!”

Concerned, Gakane looked back at Nathan Zuckerman, who appeared to be mulling over what to say. A moment later, he spoke words that were quite surprising.

“Actually, the Monster Manual you both studied from the Cavalry is based on combat records from our own Peletta Knights. I’ve faced that monster multiple times. So, there’s no need to worry so much. This is the best way to quickly end this.”

“What?”

“What you are about to witness… please keep it a secret.”

“What are you… planning to do?”

Before his words were fully out, the monster crashed through the window. Reflexively, Gakane summoned a shadow clone to block the shattered glass and grabbed Kanna with another shadow clone, rushing her to safety.

“Ugh!”

After tumbling to a somewhat safe spot, both Gakane and Kanna cautiously lifted their heads. And they were stunned to see a vivid blue aura emanating from Nathan Zuckerman’s sword as he blocked the monster’s claws.

“My God…”

It was, indeed, an overwhelming battle.

Every time Nathan Zuckerman swung his sword, an impossibly blue light sliced through the monster’s body, bursting dozens of its eyes.

Though it might look similar to the sword auras of Jimmy or other skilled swordsmen, the outcome was entirely different. An

overwhelming energy lingered at the tip of his sword, reminiscent of ancient Swordmasters who were said to have split mountains with their blades alone.

With a single swing, a crack appeared on the monster's unbreakable wing. On the second, the blade penetrated the crack, tearing off one side. The monster splattered black blood and thrashed about, unable to fly any longer, crashing to the ground with a thud that echoed through the entire palace.

Nathan Zuckerman, splattered with a bit of the poisonous black blood, advanced towards the monster with his aura-wreathed sword.

A single, flawless attack.

With a terrible sound, the monster's weak point, a red eye, exploded. Hidden among its black eyes and steel-like feathers, it burst open, followed by an immense booming noise as the monster's body exploded.

"Be careful!"

All three were knocked back by the backlash of the explosion, and the windows in the corridor shattered, bringing down the chandelier.

"Ugh…!"

After the aftermath of the explosion had passed, Gakane slowly lifted his head to survey the surroundings. Fortunately, no one else was injured. It was thanks to Gakane that, just before the explosion, he had stretched his shadow to its limit to protect everyone.

The other shadow clone, tightly holding Kanna, continued to act as a cushion to keep her from harm. In front of Nathan Zuckerman, a wall of shadow that had blocked the poison stood firmly, swaying

slightly. Nathan picked up the sword where the aura had disappeared and turned his head towards Gakane.

“Thank you. You blocked it well.”

“Ouch, ouch… If it wasn’t for your shadow clone, Gakane, my head would’ve been smashed.”

‘…I survived.’

Only then did Gakane realize that he had accomplished the last thing he needed to do and collapsed to the ground in relief. What was reflected in his eyes behind the bronze lion statue was utterly clean. Unlike the mess created by the explosion, it seemed as if nothing had happened there.

Seeing that, Gakane couldn’t help but lift the corners of his mouth. Though it seemed like an inappropriate moment, he found no other way to express this sense of achievement.

They had completely fulfilled the mission they were entrusted with.

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Chapter 558

The sights before his eyes were all distorted.

Gripping his chest, Yuder trembled in the face of an indescribable, horrific sensation. Suddenly, he took a deep breath, feeling as if he'd lost touch with what he had been doing up to that moment.

What just happened?

What occurred?

He couldn't say. All he felt was an emptiness in his chest, as if something had been forcibly ripped out, and a chill as if a wind blew through the void.

But he couldn't be injured; that much was clear.

As he blinked in a daze, the dreadful sensations gradually faded like illusions. When even the fact that he had felt such things started to seem like a lie, Yuder finally realized where he was.

The smell of dark, stagnant water wafted through the closed windows.

He was in the castle of the Duke of Peletta, where the Duke resided. Yuder stood perfectly upright, sword in hand.

And before him was,

"…"

A man sitting and bleeding from his chest. His golden locks fell over a pale forehead.

The man neither moved nor spoke. He simply sat there, as if momentarily asleep.

It was obvious to anyone that he had already drawn his last breath. Yuder continued to stare blankly at the scene before finally lowering his eyes to see his own hand. His body, hand, and the tip of his sword were all a mess, splattered with blood.

At last, everything became clear.

Yuder had successfully completed the Emperor's first mission. The Duke of Peletta had met his end as the Emperor had desired; all that remained was to discard the weapon and escape.

Yuder let go of his sword. The cheap, standard-issue blade clattered heavily to the ground. Anyone who examined it would be unable to identify the assailant.

He turned his back and walked away. Passing by a hearth whose fire had long been extinguished, he felt an inexplicable chill crawl up his spine.

As if he had left something crucial behind…

"…"

Yuder suddenly opened his eyes. His face was damp. He took a deep breath, and as he waved his hand, someone gently grasped his arm and lowered it.

"Easy there. You seem disoriented; I was just trying to adjust your posture."

"Commander?"

His own voice sounded foreign, even to him. Yuder swallowed the dry cough bursting from his parched throat and looked up at

Kishiar’s face.

His hair was a mess, soaked in sweat, and his red eyes revealed deep exhaustion. But his cheeks still radiated a lingering warmth and emotional vitality. The moment their eyes met, the creeping chill retreated like a mirage.

Looking away, Yuder saw the Emperor lying down, the Empress holding his hand and speaking softly. Attendants bustled about, wiping the Emperor’s face and hands with hot towels.

‘Ah… I must have almost fainted again.’

Only then did Yuder realize that Kishiar was holding a wet towel in his other hand. Kishiar had apparently wiped the blood-stained face of Yuder the moment he awoke.

‘In front of the Emperor and Empress, how could I…?’

In an instant, Yuder’s consciousness snapped back to reality. He sat up, his head lowered, on a sofa a short distance from the Emperor’s bed. Technically, he was more reclined against Kishiar than sitting upright. Yet, none of the esteemed individuals near the bed seemed to mind or even consider it inappropriate.

“The Emperor has fully awakened, and I’ve severed our connection. The protective force covering the vessel is also perfectly effective. I’m not sure how long my power will last on others, but it should be fine for a while,” Kishiar said. He added that if any issues arose, he would immediately come to reinforce the pulling force.

“I’ve received signals from Nathan and the others. There were unexpected intruders, but they’ve been dealt with. Once the remaining evidence is sorted, I’ll come up and give you a detailed report.”

“That’s a relief,” Yuder responded.

“Yes, it is. The future looks promising.”

Kishiar mumbled something about ‘expectation’ being a curious word and silently smiled toward the Emperor. While one couldn’t guess all the layers of time and emotion stacked in that smile, it was clear that joy was the most significant part.

Yuder quietly stared at his face. From the moment he had resolved to accomplish this task, he had wanted to see that face. Even though he felt drained to the point of death, he didn’t feel particularly parched.

“… Thank you for keeping both your promise with the Emperor and with me,”

Those words arrived at Yuders ears a bit late as he had been lost in Kishiar’s face.

“I wanted to say this as soon as you woke up,” Kishiar said, lowering his head to kiss Yuder’s hand. “I’ll never forget what we’ve accomplished with these hands. Nor should you.”

…

“We should leave soon. Once we return, we should first get you checked… get you treated, and then youll let me express my feelings to you as much as I want.”

Kishiar’s request, polite yet filled with desperate longing, seemed to ignite a spark within Yuder’s heart. Yuder looked down at the warmth of the hand holding his and nodded.

“Yes, but you should also get checked and treated.”

“Of course.”

During the brief moment when his consciousness had wavered, Yuder had felt a faint chill. Kishiar was unaware of this, which was a small comfort to Yuder.

Perhaps the memory resurfaced now because he had been strongly connected to Kishiar throughout the day. It was fortunate that the ‘connection’ did not persist long after he lost consciousness.

Otherwise, Kishiar might have sensed and shared something more.

Yuder let out a soft sigh and changed the subject.

“By the way, did the Emperor mention what ability he has awakened?”

“He seemed preoccupied and didn’t specify. He only said he wanted to see the Empress and then fell asleep.”

Kishiar spoke casually of the Emperor’s intimate moments, showing no signs of embarrassment. It seemed he thought Yuder should naturally know.

“Ah, I see.”

“Once he wakes up and stabilizes, he will surely send word.”

It was Emperor Keilusa’s awakening ability. Yuder reflected on his experiences over time. Siblings often awoke to similar abilities, but given that Kishiar’s ability was somewhat unique, it was difficult to guess the Emperor’s ability as well.

“If it were a specialized ability in defense or protection like Prince Ejain, it would certainly make life easier in the future… I can only wonder.”

The answer came to them shortly after they returned to the Cavalry.

It was through a letter sent by the Emperor, employing his own “eyes” and “ears.”

“So… no one knows for sure what happened at the Sun Palace that day, and the only ones who could have infiltrated were the healers. And even then, they caused an unforeseen disaster.”

“I apologize, Your Grace.”

Duke Diarca looked down at his subordinates with a colder expression than ever. The nobles surrounding him bowed their heads, avoiding eye contact as if they had nothing to say.

“You fools allowed a monster into the Imperial Palace, providing the Emperor’s side with an excuse. My clear instructions were merely to discreetly gather information on the internal situation. How was my message conveyed to lead to such an incident?”

“That is…”

Eyes exchanged glances amongst the people; many were filled with fear. When Duke Diarca clicked his tongue, that terror spread even more.

“Regardless of what the Emperor’s side discovers, it can be dismissed as their own reckless action. But we must find out who conveyed my intentions to them at that time and why this act was committed. Who is currently in contact with them?”

“…I am.”

“Baron Renbow.”

Baron Renbow, who had taken over the communication between the healers and Duke Diarca after the now-absent Baron Durmand, raised his hand with a relatively calm face.

“Speak. Why did this happen?”

“Your Grace, your instructions were clearly and accurately conveyed to them, without addition or omission. I can swear it on my name and faith.”

“And yet?”

“According to them, this incident may appear as a failure on the surface, but it is actually not so.”

Duke Diarca’s eyebrows twitched in displeasure. The surrounding nobles murmured among themselves.

“Not so?”

“Yes. There is someone leading them, referred to as the ‘Sage.’ He has requested an audience with you, Your Grace. He wishes to report directly to you on the information gathered from this incident.”

“A presumptuous and dangerous individual…”

“How dare he…”

The whispers that had been rising fell silent with a small thump against Duke Diarca’s chair.

The elderly Duke did not, as the nobles had anticipated, erupt in anger or leave his seat. He stared thoughtfully at Baron Renbow for a moment before speaking.

“If he dares to speak out even after causing such a major mishap, he must be confident that he has something of significance.”

“…”

“Very well. Tell him to come.”

“Are you sure, Your Grace? To allow such lowly people to”

“Wouldn’t it be better to dispose of them right away?”

Ignoring the nobles’ words, Duke Diarca shook his head.

“Regardless, they are the ones treating the Crown Prince. I’ve been curious, so let’s see their faces first before making a decision.”

“Very well, Your Highness.”

Baron Renbow respectfully bowed his head. No one noticed the momentary glint of confusion in his eyes, nor did they realize that as soon as the conversation ended, he immediately headed to the quarters where the ‘healers’ were staying. There, he knelt before the Sage and relayed everything that had transpired.

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Chapter 559

Everyone knew that Emperor Keilusa had long suffered from a mysterious chronic illness.

Ever since the carriage accident that occurred during the Crown Prince Selection Test, the Emperor had rarely left the Sun Palace, keeping a low profile as if he were sequestering himself away.

Though on significant matters, he would express his opinions through written decrees and move his ministers to fulfill his intentions, that was all there was to it.

Rumors circulated that the Emperor’s illness was a horrific skin disease or even a form of madness. However, no one knew the exact truth. Even Duke Peletta, who had returned to the capital and resumed his normal activities since the Emperor’s reclusion, kept silent on the matter.

The House of Diarca, who had taken the Crown Prince’s position, seemed endlessly at ease. The Empress, who appeared in public events in place of the Emperor, grew visibly more pale as the days passed. People inferred from these changes that Emperor Keilusas chronic illness was incurable.

What was there to fear from a man who was, after all, soon to die? And what need was there to resist whatever he might do?

The imperial family’s authority had been waning for decades, making it difficult to contend with the four major ducal houses. Even Emperor Keilusa, who had earned high expectations since his days as a prince for his eloquent speech and sharp mind, found it difficult to overturn the power dynamics that had been suppressed since ancestral times.

Needless to say, that was all the more true now that he had acquired a fatal illness.

The imperial family was no longer the formidable entity it had been hundreds of years ago. Under the influence of Dukes like Diarca, who aimed to empower the nobility further, the Orr system, originally a stable cooperation between the officials who followed the Emperor and the territorial lords who had inherited lands generationally, gradually lost its strength.

The stature of the ducal houses was evident in the titles they bore, no less significant than those of a Crown prince. The imperial knights, who should protect the imperial family, were filled with individuals more concerned with their own families and interests.

The numerous nobles who commanded vast lands took advantage of the chaos to ignore cooperation with officials and further their own gains. It was the first time in Orrs thousand-year history that the nobles' power had been so great.

'After all, the current Emperor will soon be gone. We must seize all the benefits we can before a new imperial family rises.'

Once established, such perceptions are not easily changed.

Even if the Emperor invested effort into establishing the Cavalry, specialized in monster extermination, even if he commanded a stricter investigation into the activities of the Apeto and other ducal houses, even when he made an appearance at a palace party for the first time in years, few considered it a serious threat.

This was the same even when the following news leaked out of the Sun Palace:

'A monster has appeared within the Sun Palace, attempting to harm the Emperor. We will find and bring to justice the perpetrator and those behind this crime.'

Such incidents used to be fairly common. Back when Emperor Keilusa was actively keeping the ducal houses in check, the Sun Palace and Dawn Palace had seen their share of various suspicious and dangerous events.

But this time, they said a monster had appeared in the Sun Palace.

And it had to happen right after the newly established Cavalry celebrated solving an abnormal monster occurrence in the western regionof all the places, a monster had to appear in the Sun Palace.

It was an attack rife with symbolism, evident to anyone who saw it.

“Remarkable, really, Duke Diarca is putting on quite a show, especially considering the end isn’t far off.”

“This is obviously a response to the humiliation they suffered at the party, at the hands of the Cavalry. Revealing this level of defiance as the Emperor’s end approaches is rather alarming.”

“Obvious, maybe, but they’ll just cut off the tail and be done with it. That’s just how Diarca operates.”

Right on cue, whispers flowed from within the Sun Palace that the Emperor’s chronic illness had deteriorated further since the failed assassination attempt. People were certain they hadn’t been wrong to fear Duke Diarca. Meanwhile, they expected the Cavalry and Duke Peletta, who had relied solely on the Emperor, to be more circumspect.

“Kishiar. Did you find the letter I sent entertaining?”

Emperor Keilusa lay half-reclined on his bed, engaging with his brother, seemingly more relaxed than ever.

“I was genuinely surprised. I always thought you were never one for jokes, Your Majesty, but I have to admit this one got me.”

“I suppose. I was quite shocked myself when I first realized this power.”

A faint smile crossed the Emperor’s face, but vanished just as quickly.

“As I demonstrated through that letter, I can temporarily transfer my sight and hearing to any object I touch. Whoever receives that object becomes visible and audible to me, even as I sit still.”

The letter Kishiar had received from the Emperor while he was with the Cavalry seemed no different from any previous correspondence. Except for the peculiar line: “As soon as you receive this, speak out loud any question you wish to ask me. However, it should be a question only I can answer.”

Kishiar realized that this was related to the Emperor’s newfound abilities. The serious question he and Yuder eventually settled on was, ‘May we send more dresses to Her Majesty, the Empress?’ And within an hour, a new letter arrived with the message, ‘No purple dresses. Also, give Baron Aile a break.’

The reply was eerily accurate, as if the Emperor had been watching all along.

“Did you discover this ability thanks to the Empress?”

“…Let’s just say that’s the case.”

After the Empress had left his side to return to her own palace, the Emperor found himself missing her as usual. But then something wholly different happenedher voice and figure appeared before him, thanks to some mysterious power. The shock nearly had him tumbling out of bed.

The power didn’t last long, but after several trials, the Emperor quickly realized just how formidable this newfound ability was.

“I still don’t know how to maintain this power for an extended period, or how it could be further utilized. But in our current circumstances, it will surely be helpful.”

“Indeed, especially for gauging the reactions of those who mistakenly believe Your Majesty’s illness to be far more severe.”

“I’ve already sent it out.”

“Of course, you had to.”

In the brief moment their eyes met, familiar emotions swirled between the brothers. Though in varying degrees, both wore similarly chilly smiles.

“I’ve already discovered something interesting. I initially found the failed invasion odd, as it seemed inconsistent with Duke Diarca’s usual tactics. But judging by the reactions, it appears it wasn’t something he intended after all.”

“Ah, so that was the case.”

Their eyes met once more, the space between them filled with the intricate fabric of emotions and secrets they had always shared.

Intruders had entered the Sun Palace through a multitude of pathways. It was clear that information had leaked about that day, but it was also evident that they were unaware of the specifics of what would transpire here. Had they known, they wouldn’t have ventured so recklessly, poking around and threatening; they would have opted for a far more reliable method.

“The same conclusion was reached based on the investigations by Nathan and members of the Cavalry,” Kishiar continued. “All of

the ordinary people who came in through other routes were all filtered out at the knight's lines. We believe that the Awakeners who managed to stay and breach our defenses are responsible for this incident."

"Have we identified these individuals?"

"According to Kanna, it appears that one of them had the ability to block information. Controlling both animals and humans, another Awakener seemed to be enhanced by a third party, making it difficult to trace back to their point of origin. It will take a bit more time to understand the individuals involved."

"Even with an Awakener who can read information, they are this elusive? They must have moved with extreme caution. They didn't even know that we would call in the Cavalry"

Emperor Keilusa stroked his chin, his eyes behind his glasses flickering with numerous speculations. Compared to before, when merely maintaining his physical form was draining, his gaze was incomparably clearer.

"But you seem to have some suspicions."

"It's hard to fool your sagacious eyes, Your Majesty."

Kishiar let out a wry smile.

"Technically, it was not me, but my assistant who has identified a prime suspect. An Awakener group that we've been tracking for unrelated reasons is currently by the Crown Prince's side. While we don't know their objective yet, there is a high probability that they lent temporary aid for this occasion."

The Duke of Diarca had been in contact with a significant number of Awakeners before the incident. Given that they had been

expanding their forces and contracting mercenaries, one of them being responsible seemed highly likely.

However, Yuder pointed out different individuals. Kishiar's invaluable assistant, who was now likely resting semi-forcibly within the Cavalry, had pinpointed the most suspicious people based on his personal investigations conducted over time within the unit.

'If we are to find Awakeners capable of this within the Duke of Diarca's circle, then these are the ones I find exceedingly suspicious.'

Those identified were the Awakener healers treating the Crown Prince. Their true identities were the dangerous Awakener that the Cavalry and Peletta Knights were currently trackingoriginating from the Star of Nagran, where the "Sage" they followed also seemed to be present.

The Emperor nodded slowly after hearing Kishiar's explanation.

"Indeed, we should investigate them as well."

"They have been residing in the Bright Palace since the day before the intrusion. A rather interesting coincidence."

"I'm not interested in coincidences. Nevertheless, it will make it easier to investigate using this power."

"Wouldn't they make excellent practice targets?"

"For now, I plan to feign being indisposed to observe those around me. Make sure you sync up your actions accordingly."

"Leave it to me."

A flawless smile spread across Kishiar's face. However, as the Emperor stared at him, he slightly furrowed his brows and tilted his

head.

“By the way, Kishiar.”

“Yes, Your Majesty.”

“Have you had trouble sleeping since that day?”

The sudden question was so sharp that even Kishiar couldn’t help but show a momentary lapse. The leisurely smile on Kishiar La Orr’s face briefly faltered before returning to its original state.

“Why do you ask such a question?”

“Don’t pretend you don’t know. I might not be able to read other people’s eyes, but it’s hard to deceive me. If you’re not feeling well, say so.”

Only then did Kishiar’s expression change slightly. He erased the hopeful look he had been wearing while discussing the upcoming events. What emerged instead was a subtle and slightly weary gaze, as if even he himself didn’t know what to say.

“No, that’s not the issue.”

“Then what is?”

“…I had a rather strange dream.”

“A dream?”

The Emperor asked, his expression slightly puzzled as this was the first time he had heard his brother cite such a reason. A penetrating gaze scanned Kishiar’s face, trying to determine if he was telling the truth or lying.

“Yes, a dream. To be frank, it was more like a nightmare. That’s probably why I seemed a bit fatigued.”

Kishiar smiled as he rubbed his forehead.

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Chapter 560

Hearing that, the Emperor finally judged his brother’s words to be true. A younger brother whose ability to mask his sincerity with deceit was perhaps even more remarkable than his hidden swordsmanship. Yet, there was no trace of a smile in his eyes now.

‘If it’s gotten to this point, he must have had an extraordinary dream.’

Kishiar hadn’t elaborated on what dream he had. The Emperor felt no compulsion to press him on the matter.

Instead, the Emperor let out a brief sigh and spoke in his usual calm tone.

“You’ve recently exerted yourself on my behalf; your body may not yet be fully recovered. If you suddenly had a bad dream, its likely an extension of that. You should go back and rest for today.”

“Aren’t there still matters left to discuss?”

“It can wait. These are issues I can handle on my own.”

As if sensing something in those words, Kishiar lifted his head. For a rare moment, the Emperor’s face relaxed into a smile.

“Dont I have a lot of time now?”

Both brothers understood the implications of that statement better than anyone else.

“The human heart is indeed fickle. I thought I was certain about my plans, the reasons for them, and my own desires. But upon reflection, I realize that’s not entirely true.”

Kishiar’s eyelids twitched. The words were the same as when he had brought Yuder to the dinner table to persuade the Emperor. Returning those words, the Emperor looked immensely relieved as he spoke his final words.

“You’ve helped me so far, now its time for the reverse. If you find it hard to rest because of bad dreams or if you have something you want to say, contact me anytime.”

Kishiar didn’t respond immediately. After closing and opening his eyes slowly several times, the man finally let out a deep sigh and a laugh.

“Thank you for your concern for brother. Finally, it feels real that you have returned to yourself.”

“Ah, before you go, take that with you.”

The Emperor’s gaze shifted to a small box that had been on the table even before Kishiar arrived. The box was marked with a cryptic symbol recognizable only to those who knew the code.

“Is this from Nelarn?”

“Yes. A recent letter from Prince Ejain to Baron Aile was in the dispatch. The artifact we talked about came with it… As you know, I no longer have a need for it. Still, it might be useful for study, so Id like you to take it.”

Ever since safely returning to his homeland, Nelarns second prince, Ejain, had been sending frequent correspondence for cooperation. Through close collaboration with him, the Emperor had successfully thwarted the ascension to the throne of other princes from Nelarn who had alliances with the aristocratic factions within his own Orr Empire.

‘Although the king still holds on for now… If Prince Ejain solidifies his power base like this, a declaration of surrender won’t be far off.’

After returning to Nelarn, Prince Ejain acted with unprecedented resolve. Trusting and appointing those who would truly side with him, he effectively reined in internal enemies, consolidating power swiftly.

Initially lacking only the confidence and resolve, the prince had already earned the broad trust of his people. Once that gap was filled, everything else followed smoothly, as if wings had been added.

Although surrounding nations seemed eager to dip their toes into the internal strife of Nelarn, hoping to benefit from its turmoil, they were unlikely to gain anything. Emperor Keilusa recalled the prince’s last letter, which had read, *“I expect to resolve all matters within a few months without a civil war, and I shall never forget the help we have exchanged.”*

Contrary to expectations that the situation in Nelarn would escalate into a full-blown civil war among the princes, it had come to an incredibly quick and stable conclusion.

Nelarn was not a vast country in terms of landmass, but its excellent climate and geography had made it a stable core among the small western countries throughout its long history. Although it had recently seen many of its citizens depart due to various problems, this would become a thing of the past once Prince Ejain ascended the throne.

Emperor Keilusa hoped that the prince would become a steadfast ally and was thoroughly satisfied with the current outcome. Blocking the western countries, including Nelarn, where the corrupt nobles of Orr could profit, would undoubtedly benefit the Emperor.

The Emperor felt fairly pleased with these thoughts, but the expression on Kishiar’s face seemed somewhat more downcast than before as he picked up and opened a box.

“Is something bothering you?” The Emperor wondered, turning his gaze back to the box.

“Your Majesty, has the prince manifested his second gender?” Kishiar’s voice filled the Emperor’s ears.

“Hmm? Ah, yes… I believe I did hear something about that. He encountered an enemy at the time of manifestation but was unharmed. How did you know?”

“I sensed the scent. The prince’s second gender is likely Alpha.”

“You can discern that so clearly?”

Though the Emperor himself was an Awakener, he had not manifested a second gender; the concept remained somewhat foreign to him. A bit startled, he looked at Kishiar’s face and hesitated for a moment.

Information about Prince Ejain receiving much assistance from Yuder Aile during his perilous journey back to his homeland and becoming friends with him crossed the Emperor’s mind.

Yuder Aile was not only the close assistant that his brother uncharacteristically cherished but also a brave soul who had risked his own life to save the Emperor’s.

Moreover, Yuder had been the only one to dance with his brother in the middle of the imperial palace.

The only reason that remarkable event had been somewhat accepted among the people was that the two had different second genders…

“…”

Who was Kishiar?

He was someone who had merely smiled when robbed of his rightful position as Crown Prince through covert arrangements and deceitful schemes by the former Empress Dowager. Even in the harsh and desolate lands of Peletta, he had not blamed anyone. He had diligently turned the worthless soil into valuable land.

‘So he could have that expression.’

Even though he had felt it through his eyes and skin, everything that seemed so unlikely became astonishingly real for the first time.

The Emperor vividly remembered Kishiar’s face when he first opened his eyes after awakening. Kishiar had been holding Yuder, who had been bleeding from his eyes and nose, in his arms.

His gaze was a mess, trembling at his own fingertips, yet he never let go of the other person in his arms. Instead, he rested his head and ceaselessly wiped his blood. That gaze, which had seemed like a fleeting illusion back then, as he had quickly lost consciousness once more, now seemed to reappear here.

Of course, it was but a fleeting moment, barely noticeable except to the Emperor, who knew him as his own flesh and blood. Kishiar soon picked up the box containing the relic and the letter, replying, Since I was going to examine it anyway, I might as well take it.

“Then I shall take my leave. Your Majesty, please prioritize your health over all else.”

“Very well. Once the health of Baron Aile improves, come back. Although I cannot openly grant you a reward, I do wish to convey my gratitude.”

After his brother left, the Emperor sighed softly.

Because they were of the same bloodline, he knew for certain. There was no more need to probe or question. His younger brother

was completely sincere.

—

Yuder turned his head at the sound of a knock on the door.

The person who entered, holding a bowl of watery soup and a grim expression, was Enon.

“Here’s lunch. Eat.”

The way he spoke, it sounded less like something a pharmacist would say to a patient and more like what a jailer would say to a prisoner.

“I was going to go downstairs to eat.”

“Just eat it. You’re better off not moving to stabilize your eyes.”

Arguing with Enon didn’t seem like a wise choice, especially considering his already foul mood after learning what Yuder had been up to. Taking the hint from past experiences, Yuder obediently accepted the large bowl of soup. For some reason, it seemed to be made of the same material as the washbasin in the room. Neither the giver nor the receiver commented on this.

“While you’re eating, look up here.”

“…”

“Follow my finger with just your eyes.”

Yuder obediently followed Enon’s moving finger with his eyes. The eye that had been bleeding was still a bit swollen, but it was significantly better than before.

“It seems you’re mostly healed.”

“I told you so.”

“Still, you should take your medicine. Also, there’s something else we need to talk about.”

“What is it?”

“It’s about that troublesome task you requested.”

It wasn’t difficult to figure out what he meant: the healers of the Crown Prince who had been investigated by the intelligence unit. In other words, a matter related to the Star of Nagran. Yuder paused in his eating, prompting a sharp warning from Enon.

“Don’t stop. I’ll tell you after you’ve finished.”

“Fine.”

Only after emptying the large bowl of soup under watchful eyes, and consuming a heap of medicine, did Enon finally open his mouth as he had promised.

“While you guys were separately keeping tabs on those fellows, I also made my inquiries with the help of some contacts. Although there’s nothing particularly spectacular, I did hear one interesting thing. Whether it’s true or not, I can’t say yet.”

“Let’s decide that later. Tell me.”

“It’s about the leader of those guys, the one they called Sage. I heard he used to live in the capital.”

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Chapter 561

“It’s about the leader of those guys, the one they called Sage. I heard he used to live in the capital.”

“Sage?”

Enon’s interest was enough to indicate that this was no ordinary news, but this was truly unexpected.

“Yes. He was a manager.”

Manager. Yuder recalled the visage of the Sage he had glimpsed briefly.

The Sage that Yuder knew from his previous life was unlike the genuine Sage of this era, who looked like a kind-hearted middle-aged man. With a neatly kept beard and clear complexion, he didn’t look like someone who had struggled in life. But to think he was a manager in the capital? It was hard to believe.

“Are you sure you didn’t mistake him for someone else?”

“The information comes from someone I worked with in the Intelligence Guild. He mainly deals with lower-level managers, but his memory for people is exceptional.”

“Hmm”

Yuder’s expression shifted. A slight nod conveyed the implicit request for more information. It was an attitude that seemed slightly arrogant, yet also entirely natural for someone long accustomed to leadership. Indeed, Enon had sensed this about him from the start.

“That guy said there was a manager who had worked for a long time in the Blue Crown. Two years ago, he suddenly cleared out his home and disappeared in the dead of night. It caused quite a stir. And he said that the Sage had a striking resemblance to that manager.”

“Vanished in the dead of night?”

“Yes. Back then, it wasn’t uncommon for people to disappear like that, but it was the first time for someone from the Blue Crown. That’s why he remembered it so well.”

“People disappeared like that occasionally? Why… Ah.”

Yuder suddenly recalled the timeframe and understood the reason. Enon gave a sly smile.

“Yes, you’d know the reason better than anyone.”

While it wasn’t particularly relevant to Yuder, who had been living alone in the mountains, there had been an atmosphere of fear and suspicion toward the newly emerging Awakeners at that time.

The chaos had somewhat subsided after announcements were made about the Red Stone, but there were still many Awakeners who had fled their hometowns. It was a fact evident even from the Awakeners Yuder had met, such as those from the Star of Nagran.

“So, the theory is that the manager who disappeared might have become an Awakener and fled?”

Yuder had not known that even in the capital, where the Emperors reach was closest, there were such individuals. However, it made sense if they had Awakened before the announcements about the Red Stone and the Awakeners had begun.

“Yes, so I did some more digging.”

“And? What did you find?”

“Here, take a look.”

Yuder unfolded the parched paper handed to him by Enon. It contained the personal details of some managers who had worked at the Blue Crown. A red stamp in the corner indicated that it was a discarded document.

‘The ink and paper are definitely the ones exclusively used by managers. It’s neither duplicated nor a copy. This is the original.’

It was a mystery how Enon had managed to find a document that must have been buried somewhere for years.

“How did you manage to get your hands on this?”

“Isn’t this what they dragged me into their intelligence department for?”

“I knew that, but Im asking because its impressively done.”

“Enough with the compliments, just read it already!”

Enon’s reply was curt, but Yuder noticed the slight grin tugging at the corners of Enons mouth and eyes, failing to hide his sense of satisfaction.

The name written on the documents was “Karl Enfile.” He was a Level 8 administrator who had worked in the Blue Crown, responsible for library management and temple communications. If he were still alive today, he would be in his late fifties.

The age seems about right, Yuder thought.

According to the documents, Karl Enfile led a fairly average life for a lower-level administrator. Born into an obscure family with little

reputation, he became an administrator solely on the basis of his surname, without any titles to speak of.

“He was an administrator for over 30 years and remained a Level 8. That probably means he hardly got any promotions. Did he have a family?” Yuder wondered.

There was no mention of a spouse or children in his family details. He had lived alone in the sixth wall district, led an unremarkable administrative life, neither making any significant contributions nor committing any offenses. Then, nearly three years ago, he vanished without a trace. That was the end of it.

But that doesn’t mean there’s absolutely no information to be gained about him, Yuder mused.

Even if Karl Enfile had disappeared, there would be those who still remembered him. Digging deeper could reveal more.

Enon seemed to be thinking along the same lines, and added, “From what I’ve gathered so far, Karl Enfile had quite an extensive social network. He was knowledgeable and often consulted by others. When working with the temple, he frequently gave doctrine lectures on behalf of the priests.”

Yuder interpreted this in his own way: So he was well-read and persuasive.

“Why didn’t he get promoted, then?”

“He may have been pushed out during power struggles. The documents don’t mention it, but the Blue Crown is one of those places where those who lose out in internal politics end up,” Enon explained.

Hmm. So this socially adept guy was also actively involved in power struggles, Yuder contemplated.

It wasn’t particularly surprising. There were plenty of people who appeared good from a distance but were not so upon closer examination.

Yuder had visited the Blue Crown when he applied for the Cavalry test. It was primarily a workplace for lower-level administrators. Such positions offered the best career path for people born with some but not significant advantage, although the internal atmosphere was often thick with ambition.

Yuder had sensed it when he was there to register for the test; there were more people interested in protecting their own comfort than in actually doing their jobs.

“What’s strange is that besides the guy who mentioned remembering Karl’s face, almost no one else remembers him. The guy who gave me the information said that Karl’s disappearance was quite the topic at the time, but no one remembers it now, not even his name,” Enon added.

It seemed that Enon had gone to great lengths to find documents proving Karl Enfile’s existence precisely for that reason.

It was strange for everyone to so uniformly forget someone without a reason. Yuder knew of one explanation for such an occurrence.

“The likelihood that a psychic was involved is high,” Yuder posited.

“Exactly. That’s why I want to dig deeper.”

“In that case, give me a list of people who claim they can’t remember.”

“Why?”

“If it really is the work of a psychic, then from that point on, it’s my responsibility.”

“Do you have a way to restore their memories?”

Enon asked skeptically. Yuder quietly replied, “That would also be the work of a psychic. And there’s no one who understands that power better than I do.”

Even if one’s psychic abilities seemed formidable, they were never absolute. Just as Nahans illusionary abilities had their weaknesses.

Even if these forces were invisible, as long as the same energy was being used, there was always a way to block or break it. Among mages, it was rare to be bested by magic, and swordmasters seldom lost to other swordsmen. The principle was the same.

Enon briefly furrowed his brows before reaching out and firmly grabbing Yuder’s cheek.

“…Why are you doing this?”

“Quiet. No showing off just because you think your powers are so great. Especially not when you’re bleeding all over and had to be carried here.”

“What are you talking about?”

“Just know thisno showing off, no acting cool. Because of people like you, we increasingly get patients who overextend themselves and have to be brought in.”

Annoyed for some unfathomable reason, Enon began to mutter.

“I’ll pass you the list later. You find out exactly what abilities Sage and the others possess. Even my own investigations have their

limits.”

“Understood.”

Yuder was aware, thanks to the information Kishiar had provided, that the Awakeners from the Star of Nagran were currently staying in the Bright Palace of Crown Prince for a few days.

So, the next meeting was as good as set.

‘I hope Kiolle has been doing a good job investigating them.’

“By the way, what happened with your Commander?”

Having finished their conversation and about to clear the tableware, Enon suddenly asked as if he had just remembered something. He seemed reluctant but inescapable in his inquiry.

“Why?”

“This morning, he came looking for Lusan and asked if he could have some divine energy for rejuvenation.”

‘…Kishiar asked for that?’

Since the day the Emperor awakened, Kishiar had been focusing on recovery, alongside Yuder. He had his condition diagnosed by Enon at Yuder’s request and had mostly stayed by Yuder’s side when he wasn’t taking medicine or sleeping in his own room. His diligent and attentive caregiving was still fresh in Yuder’s memory.

Though he had mentioned going to see the Emperor this morning, Yuder hadn’t noticed anything odd then.

‘Rejuvenation, huh.’

At face value, it might just be that Kishiar wanted to appear healthier when going to see the Emperor. But if there was another

reason…

It was Yuder who had declined Enon's offer to rest in the room next to Kishiar, opting to rest in his own room instead. But after hearing Enon's words, he began to think he should have stayed by Kishiar's side, regardless of how others might perceive it.

"Got it. Thanks for letting me know."

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Chapter 562

After Enon left, intelligence agents flooded in as if it was a shift change.

“Yuder! We heard you took on a secret mission and got injured! Is it true?”

Externally, he was supposed to be on leave for personal reasons, but it was obvious how they had found out. Gakane, who was caught between the Eldore siblings and seemed half out of his mind, was likely the source of the information.

‘Getting whatever information they want without regard for the means is a good quality for an intelligence agent, but perhaps I should give Gakane more training so he isn’t so easily swayed by his colleagues.’

In the end, he decided to let it go. At least it appeared that Gakane’s involvement in the secret mission hadn’t been discovered.

Kanna, who had seen a lot of blood, was still in the medical division, but other than being drained, Gakane had no significant injuries. So it didn’t seem like he’d been through anything major.

From Yuder’s perspective, who had expended a lot to save Gakane, it was a huge relief. Not long ago, he had sustained life-threatening injuries in the West; another injury would have likely resulted in a condition far more serious than Kanna’s current state.

“Why aren’t you answering? Is it true?”

“I can’t answer.”

“Why?”

“Because it’s a secret.”

“So it is true!”

He wondered if they had come to protest that only Gakane was called in from among the intelligence agents, but instead, they gifted Yuder some snacks. It was butter cookies, apparently popular in the capital these days. The Eldore siblings teased Devran, who had turned bright red, saying it was the first time he’d ever bought such an awkward gift.

They all shared the cookies and had a brief exchange of information about the Awakeners from the Star of Nagran they had each been observing.

Firstly, they had been exceptionally well-behaved, aside from when they went to treat the Crown Prince. No conspicuous actions like drinking or causing a scene. Their outings were almost solely for buying groceries. They seemed pious enough to be considered pilgrims, and that was indeed how they were perceived by those around them.

“But, no matter how quietly they live, people talk amongst themselves, you know. And I happen to be very good at eavesdropping.”

Devran, who had been highly praised for his keen observational skills and became an intelligence agent, lifted his chin confidently.

“I can guarantee that one of them is being ostracized.”

“Really? How did you find out?”

Devran gleefully answered Hinn’s question.

“I’ve been helping out at the grocery store they frequently visit whenever I have some free time, observing them. Except for the old

man who they called Sage, the four of them usually shop at specific times, making them easy to observe.”

“Wow, you still have the energy to do such tasks even after Cavalry training? Impressive, Devran.”

“What are you talking about? Do you know how hard it’s been to skip training without getting caught…?”

Devran caught Yuder’s eye and stopped short, picking up on the social cues.

‘Right. If he remembers who drafted that training program, he’d better watch what he says.’

But Yuder decided to generously let it slide. Training was important, but fieldwork for intelligence was even more so. No one knew Devran was skipping training as long as he didn’t admit it, which was impressive in its own way.

“Ahem! Anyway, one out of the four is always left out of the conversations. He doesn’t seem to fit in with the group. The other three also seem to somewhat ignore him.”

“Is it a personality issue?”

Devran frowned at the question.

“No, that might be a part of it, but it seems to be more about his abilities.”

“Abilities?”

“Of course, people won’t talk about it openly. But, you know, there’s a certain atmosphere when Awakeners discuss their abilities. Everyone knows that, right?”

Devran looked at them as if to say they should obviously know.

“The one being ostracized has a power that others find highly repulsive, that much is clear.”

Devran said he had only deduced that much about the reason for the ostracism.

Yuder pondered for a moment before speaking.

“Devran, can you describe the appearance of the guy who’s being ostracized?”

“Huh? Sure! He looks a bit red-skinned, like someone of southern descent. And he has a long scar on one ear. He looks somewhat timid, but I haven’t heard anyone call him by a name yet. He’s always on the outskirts, so I haven’t had the chance to hear his name.”

It was certain. The Awakener being ostracized within the group was undoubtedly the future ‘Sage’ that Yuder knew.

But wasn’t that guy’s ability just to mildly influence other people’s moods? He was an individual who used his words well to make his rather mundane power effective, so why was he being ostracized for it?

‘…Could it be that the ability I know isn’t his real power?’

He hadn’t even considered that the confession he had received before death could be a lie. Clearly, he needed to investigate further.

“Could you focus more on learning about him in the future?”

“The ostracized guy? Why?”

“There are some points that concern me. You’ve given me information I didn’t have before. It might be a bit of a burden, but please do it.”

Hearing that he had provided information even Yuder didn't know, Devran's face flushed slightly with emotion. The Eldore siblings caught on and teased him, but Devran paid them no mind.

"Alright, leave it to me!"

Beside the enthusiastic Devran, Gakane mumbled with less confidence.

"Uhm… I've only been able to know when those people come and go because I've placed shadows on them, so I haven't really delved deeper. What should I do?"

"You've been busy lately. It's fine."

"Still, I did find out that lately they've been spending more time and going more frequently to the palace than when we first started watching them. Though it seems like useless information now since they havent returned to their lodging for days…"

"No, no, Gakane! Thanks to you, we have the courage to make a move."

Pretending to scold him for only playing around, the Eldore siblings patted Gakane's shoulder. Gakane looked worried as he asked,

"Courage? What courage?"

"What can we do with these powers?"

The siblings, who had developed their abilities to not only possess unparalleled strength but also to teleport objects on their own, grinned wickedly.

"If they haven't returned home for days, and Gakane's power lets us know who's coming and going, isn't this the perfect time to sneak

in for a little observation?”

“That’s way too dangerous!”

“So, we’re just going to miss this opportunity?”

“Yuder, say something!”

Yuder took a moment to consider and finally made up his mind.

“Indeed, this seems like the most opportune time to take action.”

“See? I knew Yuder would agree. Trust us, we’re completely confident.”

“Then I’ll leave this task to the three of you. And if possible, bring back small items from there. Kanna may be able to help us with them.”

“Understood.”

The siblings readily agreed.

The intelligence agents, having finished all the snacks, each left a comment of concern for Yuder’s health before leaving the room. Only Gakane remained, seeming a bit hesitant.

“Gakane, do you have something to say?”

“Um, it’s about that secret mission we just completed.”

“You don’t need to apologize for almost blowing our cover to Hinn and Finn.”

“No, no, it’s not that.”

Yuder wondered what else Gakane could have on his mind, sensing that it was something entirely different. After a moment of

hesitation, Gakane clenched his fist and spoke.

“What do you think, would Sir Nathan Zuckerman be willing to teach me swordsmanship?”

“Nathan Zuckerman?”

“During this mission, I noticed… he’s incredibly skilled with a sword! I’ve never seen a knight so proficient.”

‘Ah, right. Nathan Zuckerman did defeat the final monster on his own. He must have displayed his true skills.’

Seeing Gakane’s eyes filled with genuine admiration, it was evident that he’d discovered Nathan Zuckerman’s mastery of the sword.

“I know I’m not a member of the Peletta Knights, so it might not be appropriate for me to ask, but… I still want to. The thing is, I don’t know where to find him usually. I’ve been looking but haven’t seen him.”

Being Kishiar’s assistant, Yuder had often seen Nathan Zuckerman. Gakane seemed to be banking on that.

Gakane had always been more obsessed with becoming stronger than any other member. Although he had primarily focused on training his shadow clone, considering his past efforts to become a knight, it seemed possible he had been intentionally avoiding swordsmanship.

‘If he’s genuinely willing to learn… Kishiar would undoubtedly facilitate it.’

Kishiar, more than anyone else, encouraged the growth of his subordinates and enjoyed teaching himself. Considering this, Yuder

thought that Nathan Zuckerman, who had reached the pinnacle under such a person, was unlikely to refuse.

“Alright. I’ll pass the word along when I see him.”

“Thank you!”

Gakane got up, his face blooming like a freshly-watered rose. He was about to leave in high spirits when, unluckily, he almost bumped into Kishiar standing right outside the door. Gakane froze in surprise.

“Commander! I didn’t know you were there. I apologize.”

“It’s alright. You seem to have had a pleasant conversation.”

“Well, haha, it’s not confirmed yet, but Yuder agreed to help me with a request.”

Kishiar’s eyes softened as he looked at Gakane.

“Good to hear.”

“Yes, I’ll take my leave now. Yuder, rest well!”

“…”

After Gakane left, the tall man stepped over the threshold, which felt unusually small compared to his stature, making a one-person room feel like it was made for half a person.

Yuder observed Kishiar’s pristine face that showed no signs of fatigue, despite having recently received divine power from Lusan.

“How was your trip to the palace?”

“Good. His Majesty said he wants to see you once you’re fully recovered. It seems he wants to thank you properly.”

Kishiar’s answer was consistent with his usual demeanor. Yuder continued to observe him while taking in the faint fragrance that emanated from him the moment he sat down.

Even though his demeanor seemed utterly calm, was that truly the case on the inside as well?

Yuder had never felt the need for this uncontrollable ‘connection’ as much as he did right now.

And the moment Kishiar seemed to sense something strange and looked up to meet his gaze, Yuder felt something intensely grip and release his chest in an extremely brief moment.

It was emotion.

However, it wasn’t Yuder’s emotion. The intensity of the feeling was so strong that it almost felt like pain, and Yuder was perplexed upon realizing that such powerful emotions were storming within the man who appeared so beautiful and tranquil.

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Chapter 563

It was emotion.

However, it wasn't Yuder's emotion. The intensity of the feeling was so strong that it almost felt like pain, and Yuder was perplexed upon realizing that such powerful emotions were storming within the man who appeared so beautiful and tranquil.

"Commander."

"Hm?"

"Is something the matter?"

"A lot has been going on."

The man answered as if he had been waiting for the question.

"I have to find ways to help His Majesty, especially since it seems he plans to frequently use his new ability. We also need to discuss how to utilize the monster corpse obtained during the intrusion, and according to reports, the harvest in Peletta is so good this year that their storage is full. We'll have to find a solution. Plus, there's a relic that's arrived from Nelarn that needs examining."

Setting aside the other matters for the moment, the last point caught his attention.

'A relic from Nelarn… According to Prince Ejain, it's from the blind sage, presumed to be Archmage Luma. So it has finally arrived.'

If it was indeed an object connected to Luma, it would naturally pique his interest.

However, none of these matters explained the emotional turbulence he'd sensed in Kishiar. Compared to that, a relic seemed trivial. Yuder let out a small breath and spoke.

"If His Majesty is seeking methods to utilize and train his awakened abilities, I will compile effective training techniques from our Cavalry and submit them. I may not know how to make use of the monster corpse, but I have gathered some more information about the suspected intruders from the Star of Nagran, which I can share now. As for the harvest issue… Why are you looking at me like that?"

He thought he had spoken as he usually would, yet Kishiar's eyes were peculiar.

"Just thinking that you seem to have truly recovered."

"Enon said the same thing earlier."

Kishiar sat down next to Yuder's bed. Yuder didn't avoid the hand that reached out towards his cheek. The tip of the thumb lightly brushed beneath his eyes, which no longer shone golden, before withdrawing.

Through that touch, Yuder felt sure once again.

'Something is indeed different.'

Yuder, who rarely hesitated to speak his mind to anyone, found it different when facing Kishiar. He stared at the man, so adept at concealing his feelings, and spoke firmly.

"I heard you received divine power from Priest Lusan this morning."

"The pharmacist must have told you."

“So something did happen, didn’t it?”

“Hm… There’s a letter that came along with the relic from the prince. Would you like to receive it?”

A small letter emerged from Kishiar’s pocket. Yuder accepted it but set it aside without even looking at it.

“Commander.”

“Yes, I know why you’re asking.”

Finally, Kishiar raised both his hands and smiled again. However, this smile faded away almost as quickly as it had appeared.

“I had a dream. Because of it, I couldn’t sleep well. Even with divine power, I can’t heal myself. So, I did what I could to avoid causing you concern before seeing you.”

””

“That’s all there is to it. Truly.”

From his experiences with Kishiar, Yuder knew he wasn’t lying. Kishiar lightly touched his own forehead and eyes; he looked a bit tired.

The fatigue in his eyes evoked memories from a previous life, causing Yuder’s fingertips to twitch involuntarily.

‘A dream so disturbing he couldn’t sleep well… Is the impact of the connection affecting Kishiar once again?’

Yuder had long known that the dreams Khisiar had were not ordinary. For some time now, Kishiar had been having dreams related to his past life.

Up until then, he had rarely remembered them upon waking. But what about the most recent, unsettling dream?

That time, Kishiar dreamt almost the same dream that Yuder had. It was a dream about a period when Yuder, in his past life, had just started learning swordsmanship from Kishiar. He couldnt recall the conversations they'd had in the dream, but he did remember, as vividly as dawn, the first basic swordsmanship routine Yuder had practiced and demonstrated. He tried it out as soon as he woke up.

The last memory from my previous life that I recalled was… what I saw on the day I treated the Emperor.

It was a memory right after Kishiar was killed.

A chill settled in his chest as he revisited that moment. His hands stiffened, and a dark haze clouded his vision.

I thought it was possible because we both slept at the same time on the same day when we had the same dream before. But that wasn't the case this time.

In the absence of understanding this inexplicable 'connection' between Kishiar's dreams and the reality, there was nothing to be sure of.

The connection between him and Yuder had become more robust through these events. According to the last memory he had while healing the Emperor, the threads linking the two had increased to an uncountable number.

If what he saw is truly what I think it is,

He understood why Kishiar was so unsettled that he couldn't sleep again, why he needed the restorative effects of divine power, and why he tried to hide all of this from Yuder.

If my suspicion is correct

Yuder hesitantly moved his usually impassive lips to ask again.

“…May I inquire what dream you had?”

“I’m always willing to answer any questions from my assistant, but this time, I think knowing it won’t make either of us feel better.”

That sentence seemed almost like a stamp of approval on Yuder’s thoughts.

He could continue to feign ignorance about that dream. But the moment Yuder remembered the complex and painful emotional storms he had briefly felt in Kishiar, he knew he couldn’t.

If I am involved in Kishiars dream, then it’s something I must resolve, no matter what.

“Even so, if that dream is related to me, I would like to know. Please tell me.”

Yuder asked, even though he had already anticipated the answer. Lowering his eyes, he felt his body becoming increasingly tense as he waited for the response.

“…It was a dream where you die.”

When he heard that, Yuder briefly doubted his hearing.

“You were standing under a guillotine in the square, condemned.”

””

“The first time I had that dream was the day after healing the Emperor, and I barely remembered it when I woke up. So, I soon forgot. But… when I dreamt the same dream the next day, things started to become a bit clearer. And finally, yesterday.”

Kishiar paused for a moment. For the first time, Yuder saw him hesitate so visibly.

“I finally realized who the condemned person I saw in my dream was.”

Faced with those deeply shadowed, crimson eyes, Yuder found himself at a loss for words.

…

“When I woke you before by calling your hidden name, you said it felt like the secrets you were trying to hide were being shared with me. Ever since we both had that shared dream, I even considered the possibility that it might be a form of prophetic dreaming.”

“…”

“But if that dream really was prophetic, then what was the meaning of the one I just had? From the moment that thought crossed my mind, sleep eluded me.”

Kishiar’s voice grew softer, almost to a whisper. Yet Yuder could hear him as clearly as if he were shouting directly into his ear.

The dream Kishiar had was not of the day Yuder would kill him.

What Kishiar saw was a day so far in the future that it could only be known by Yuder. It was a day long after Kishiar La Orr had died.

After finishing, Kishiar closed his mouth. The atmosphere grew still as if the world contained only him and Yuder.

Yuder thought he should say something. It wasn’t the dream of the day he dreaded most, so there were plenty of comforting words he could think of.

But Yuder couldn’t bring himself to say anything. His usually cool head had lost its clarity.

“Sage, do you have a moment right now?”

The Crown Prince had granted the healers a room that was exceedingly lavish. However, the room given to the sage alone was the best among them.

As soon as he stepped into the stunning room, the Awakener shrank back, overwhelmed by its opulence. It was only when he saw the sage, sitting there with a gentle expression, that he regained his composure. The room’s overpowering scent of wealth and prestige lost its luster in front of that serene and wise face.

“What brings you here at this late hour?”

“Everyone is worried about you meeting with Duke Diarca alone with Diemon tomorrow. Isn’t it too risky?”

“Don’t worry. Haven’t I explained enough? Only by demonstrating the power that Diemon possesses will they trust us.”

“But you know very well how displeased that knight, the son of Duke Diarca, has been with us. Ever since we started staying here, he’s been directly questioning us, and it’s unbearable.”

The Sage chuckled.

“Excessive worrying will eat away at your heart and harm your body. Kiolle also did the same but didn’t cause us any harm. He’s just curious.”

Hearing those words, the Awakener felt a sense of ease wash over him. The tension that had nearly choked him because of Kiolle’s constant probing disappeared, and his breathing improved.

“You’re right. I was too worried.”

“I understand. Who else would care so much for this person if not you?”

“Sage”

Touched, the Awakener bit his lip and then composed himself.

“Oh, there’s another matter I need to inform you about. Actually, I should have mentioned this first… We received news from our southern base.”

“Is everyone well?”

The sage inquired kindly, but the Awakener’s expression turned somber.

“Well Nahan has returned.”

“Nahan? Has he returned with everyone?”

The Sage’s question hung in the air, marking a pause that seemed heavier due to the Awakener’s troubled expression.

“No, he returned alone, they say. And… as soon as he recovered a bit after a few days, he disappeared again with the men who had followed him. They didn’t say where they were going, but according to Sera, who sent the news, it seems he’s headed to the capital to find the sage.”

For a moment, the gentle smile on the sage’s face faded. The Awakener spoke with a worried expression.

“Do you think he’ll really come here?”

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Chapter 564

To those who followed the sage, Nahan was an enigmatic and challenging figure. Yet, they had managed to coexist well thus far because both the sage and Nahan had distinct roles that contributed to the betterment of the entire Star of Nagran.

Whenever Nahan infiltrated places where Awakeners were oppressed and in danger, he would rescue them, and the sage would then look after and educate these people, integrating them into the community. While the sage focused on stabilizing their strongholds, Nahan would neutralize threats to these places, training the Awakeners to defend the Star of Nagran.

During the times when these responsibilities were clearly divided, everything seemed to go well. Especially in a world where the Awakeners were constantly threatened, Nahan's terrifying abilities and awkward personality were actually comforting.

'But things started to get strange as the number of strongholds and people grew.'

Initially, those who joined the Star of Nagran were individuals who wanted nothing more than to save their lives and find a place to hide. However, as people began to settle and time passed, there emerged those who wanted to wield their newfound powers for revenge.

It was inevitable that among those who had been forced to leave their homelands simply because they had awakened, there would be those with grudges. Most of their targets for revenge were loathsome nobles. While the sage tried to calm and prevent them from acting out, Nahan actually encouraged them.

Everyone knew that the reason Nahan had not returned after completing his mission in the west was because of Ershi, who

wanted revenge against the nobles in that region.

Nahan was close to the Awakeners who were filled with sorrow and a thirst for vengeance. There were moments when he seemed to believe that aiding their rage was his very purpose. Those who believed they should use their power for greater causes genuinely admired and deeply followed Nahan.

‘I know hes not the enemy. If I were ever in danger or seeking revenge, there would be no one better to help me. But I still fear him. I cant fathom what hes thinking!’

“Langbarton, are you afraid of Nahan?”

Just then, the sage asked, as if he had read the thoughts of the Awakener named Langbarton, who nervously clenched his fists. Ashamed, Langbarton’s face flushed as he stuttered.

“To be honest… I dont see him as a good comrade. I understand he does a lot for us, but… isnt it well-known that he really despises nobles? His visit to you now doesn’t feel well-intended.”

He expected the sage to respond with his usual warmth and talk about the importance of supporting one another as comrades. After all, the sage was someone who never expressed anger and instilled faith through love and warmth.

However, the response he received was different.

“Yes, it is likely that he is coming to express his concerns.”

“Ah You think so too, sage? But what could Nahan possibly be concerned about with you?”

“Langbarton, how long have you been in the Star of Nagran?”

Caught off guard by the abrupt question, Langbarton hastily sifted through his memories.

“Over a year… definitely. I met you around the time winter began last year.”

“I met Nahan two years ago, before the Star of Nagran even had a name. I was by his side for about that much.”

“Ah”

Nezo was one of the four Awakeners who had followed the sage to the Crown Prince’s palace. A young man who wore glasses, he seemed to have had some scholarly pursuits in his past. Nezo wasnt even his real name, or so people had heard. Still, he was more concerned than anyone else about the risk Nahan posed and worried for the Sage.

He had heard rumors that Nahan was among the oldest group of Awakeners on the Star of Nagran, but he had never expected those to be true. Unable to hide his surprise, Langbarton found himself comforted by the sage’s gentle words.

“At that time, Nahan was a deeply pained and vulnerable individual. He believed places like the Star of Nagran were necessary to help people like his fellow Awakeners. That belief has not changed, but it seems that his own heart might have.”

Hearing this, Langbarton looked into the sage’s eyes, still radiating warmth, and felt a deep sense of turmoil. His mind was a muddle of anger towards the ungrateful Nahan and concern for the sage.

“How could you change, sage? Who else is there who cares for us more than you?”

At this, the sage merely smiled, a bitter twist to his lips.

“Thank you for saying so. However, Nahan may not feel the same way. Or even if he once did, that may no longer be the case.”

“Is it because we’re treating the Crown Prince?”

The sage offered no reply to this, apparently not wishing to burden others with undue concern.

“I entrust you to support our brothers and sisters while I am away tomorrow, Langbarton.”

Ultimately, Langbarton left the sage’s room, drained. He returned to his own room and scanned for the bespectacled Awakener among the others while giving cursory replies to their questions.

“Nezo. Can we talk for a moment?”

Langbarton and Nezo retreated to a secluded area, avoiding the others. After all, no one in the Crown Princes palace was going to pay attention to individuals as disheveled as they were. Langbarton relayed his conversation with the Sage in full, then openly vented his frustrations.

“The Sage said not to worry even if Nahan comes. Granted, Nahan has always listened to the Sage, but who knows if he will this time? The Sage has to go to a dangerous place tomorrow with only an idiot like Diemen. What if he runs into Nahan’s gang? We have to protect him.”

“Did the Sage say that?”

Anger flared on Nezos face.

“That damn Southerner utterly useless. I knew from the moment the Sage took him in that a day like this would come. What can a bloodthirsty Southerner do?”

Nezo, who had been with the Sage for the longest time, seemed to know quite a lot about Nahan as well.

“What is it with that Nahan? What’s his issue?”

“Well, you’ve earned the Sage’s trust to be here, so you have a right to know.”

After a moments hesitation, Nezo began speaking.

“Years ago, when the Star of Nagran first appeared, the sage planned to lead us all in fleeing the Empire. Nahan was tasked with finding companions to join us until we could find a land to settle. But as you know, things have changed quite a lot since then.”

“I can see that”

The early days of the Awakeners must have been focused solely on survival. But as Awakened nobles like Duke Pelleta emerged and Cavalry was formed, the Empires attitude toward the Awakeners began to shift.

Langbarton didn’t particularly hold the Cavalry in high regard, but his ears were intact, and since arriving at the capital, he’d picked up various rumors. Whatever the case, it was true that people were less afraid of the Awakeners thanks to the Cavalry’s current exploits.

Nearly a year had passed since the Cavalry had been established, and still, no other organization like it existed outside of the Orr Empire. His comrades, who had recently relocated to a western outpost, unanimously reported, “The situation in the western countries is even worse than in the Orr Empire.”

It went without saying what life must be like for the Awakeners living in places people fled from in terror. Anyone with a head on their shoulders could assume that outside the Empire was even more dangerous.

If I'd continued living dangerously, as I did before entering the Star of Nagran, maybe," Langbarton thought, "but in the current circumstances, I wouldn't dream of fleeing the Empire.

Nezo nodded as he looked at Langbarton's face.

"Yes, most people will understand what I mean, just like you do. But that guy Nahan doesn't get it. He's been pestering the sage to keep his promises, even more so after encountering the Cavalry."

"Promises?"

"Nahan seems to think establishing a new outpost outside the Empire is a promise that must be kept. In fact, many of those who owe me their lives have said the same to the sage. They keep asking when we'll move to the new place."

"I had no idea."

"You came here alone. When the sage explains we have no plans to leave, most people accept it. There are exceptions, of course."

Nezo's face tensed up behind his glasses.

"In my opinion, the sage's current course of action is clearly better for all of us. But if Nahan concludes that the sage isn't going to keep his promises, he could ruin everything in a heartbeat."

That couldn't happen. Langbarton knew just how crucial the current moment was. Now he clearly understood what he needed to do. It even occurred to him that the sage might have trusted him for precisely this moment.

"Alright, let's take the initiative. We'll stop him from meeting the sage."

“We will?”

“According to Sera, Nahan sustained severe injuries in the west and can hardly move. If we don’t seize this opportunity, how will we catch him? He’ll surely contact us first; we’ll target that moment.”

A bit of unease flickered across Nezo’s face. He was one of those who secretly feared Nahan’s abilities.

“But you know what his abilities are like…”

“Who doesn’t have abilities? Have you forgotten who successfully handled things this time? Nahan won’t use his full power against us. We know that. I don’t know about the guys following him or the tricky ones like Hosanna… but Hosanna isn’t here now. Besides, we have Diemon on our side.”

“Hmm…”

“Diemon may be annoying, but with his abilities, we can counteract Nahan’s. It may weaken us a bit, but it should be enough. To protect sage, we have no choice but to step in!”

Finally, Nezo agreed, recognizing that this issue couldn’t be avoided forever.

“Alright, let’s do it that way.”

The two returned to the room to share the situation with the rest of their companions and suggested they unite in purpose. The group, initially hesitant, soon decided to join forces. Among them was Diemon, his face flushed at the thought of becoming the center of this alliance.

“Yuder, did you hear what I just said?”

Yuder lifted his head, noticing the small hand waving in front of his eyes. Kanna was looking at him with a worried expression.

“…No. What were you saying?”

“I said that Hosanna is getting much better… How much of that did you miss?”

“…”

Had she been talking about that? He couldn’t quite recall. Seeing that Yuder remained silent, Kanna lowered her head.

“You’ve seemed distracted ever since I first saw you. If you’re tired, we can talk about this later.”

“No, please repeat it. I’ll listen properly this time.”

“…Really, what’s going on with you?”

What’s going on? Something had indeed happened, something he couldn’t articulate.

Kishiar’s words from yesterday, about dreaming of the day he was executed, still lingered in his mind. Unable to respond, Yuder watched as Kanna left the spot, whispering that he should rest.

After that, Yuder couldn’t sleep a wink all night. And so, here he was now.

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Chapter 565

“Let me repeat myself, listen carefully. For a while now, Gayle and Doyle have been meeting with Hosanna once a day. Initially, they didn’t spend much time together, but their meetings have been getting longer.”

Kanna, who had been observing Yuder’s complexion, sighed and continued the conversation.

“He has also been eating more, and thanks to the dedicated treatment from the medical division, his physical condition has improved significantly. Just last night, Hosanna even asked me how I was doing when he heard that I was unwell and staying in the medical ward.”

Kanna had bled profusely due to the backlash from overusing her powers during a mission and had been receiving medical treatment. Fortunately, her recovery was swift, and she had been resuming her daily life since yesterday.

“So, what did you say?”

“I told him I was much better. While I was talking, I also read what he knows about the sage and his surroundings.”

“You used your abilities right after recovering?”

At the icy question, Kanna defiantly lifted her chin and shook her head.

“Of course, I didn’t overexert myself! Do you think I’m like you, Yuder?”

””

Why did the memory of Enon grumbling ‘it’s because of people like you that we get more patients overexerting themselves’ and pulling his cheek suddenly surface? Yuder had nothing to say and just exhaled a short sigh.

“Anyway, it seems like Hosanna has been more open lately; I can read his thoughts more easily now. I think I’ve learned quite a lot.”

It felt more like Kanna’s abilities had taken a significant leap than Hosanna becoming more open. Kanna likely knew this too but chose to not explicitly say so, showing a degree of humility.

“Hosanna personally thinks highly of the sage. He views him as an extremely virtuous and trustworthy benefactor. But recently, he seemed anxious about something related to the sage. Maybe it has something to do with Nahan.”

It was strange that Hosanna, being so close to Nahan, would think so highly of the sage. Was their discord a recent development?

“Actually, I found this odd. Hosanna would do anything for Nahan. Even knowing that Nahan is acting unusually toward the sage, I didn’t sense much doubt from him. He has mental barriers towards people who follow the sage but dislike Nahan, but no such barriers exist toward the sage. Do you get what I’m saying, Yuder?”

Yuder slowly nodded his head.

“I think I understand.”

“Good. So, I’ve also read Gayle and Doyle with a focus on their knowledge about the sage and found something odd.”

Kanna’s eyes sparkled with confidence.

“It seems Gayle and Doyle have harbored suspicions about the sage, who hasn’t come to rescue them even though they are alive.

But still, they genuinely believe the sage is a good person and can be trusted absolutely. They consider this normal, but it really isn't. I've never encountered this with anyone else. So, my conclusion is"

"That you think the sage's abilities are related to this phenomenon."

"Exactly."

Kanna beamed a satisfying smile at Yuder, who had instantly reached the right conclusion.

"If such a strange occurrence only happens around these individuals, it can't be a coincidence. I'd feel even more certain if I could read those Awakeners from the Star of Nagran in the West again, but even with what I have, it's enough. I'm convinced the sage must be a mental Awakener, and moreover, someone who can naturally alter people's thoughts and feelings!"

"Excellent," Yuder said, offering her an unreserved compliment.

"It even aligns with some new information I've recently discovered about the sage."

"Really? You already knew about this, Yuder?"

"It's not so much that I knew…"

Yuder chose not to mention that the information had come from Enon, but he did share what he knew about a man named Karl Enfile, suspected to be the sage. Kanna showed keen interest upon hearing this.

"If he's really the sage, then it means he left his hometown, returned, and deliberately obscured people's perceptions of him. Given that the sage recently appeared in the capital, it might not have been long since people forgot about Karl Enfile."

It was a valid point. Thanks to her ability to read information, Kanna had better instantaneous insights than anyone else. Yuder thought it was a good decision to inform her about the Star of Nagran and the sage as soon as the imperial palace mission had ended.

“It’s something worth checking out.”

“Shall I take a look? It doesn’t seem that difficult.”

“Don’t overexert yourself.”

“It’s really not a big deal. I just need to see if the same mental gaps I sense from Hosanna, Gayle, and Doyle are present in those related to Karl Enfile. And, you know…”

Kanna paused, a sly smile curving her lips. It was a look that made one think of Hinn and Finn.

“Remember I was in the house of Count Gallon before joining the Cavalry? Well, Count Gallon was a second-rank officer in the palace, specifically in charge of the imperial library and archives.”

Technically, he would be her father, but neither Kanna nor Yuder considered him to be such.

“Lately, I mean after the party, the Gallon household has been annoyingly persistent in contacting me. So, I was thinking this could be a good opportunity to find out more about Karl Enfile, who managed the documents in the Blue Crown.”

If the lower officials of the Blue Crown were in charge of the documents, then by extension, they were under the Empire. That meant they would have been under Count Gallon, who managed the royal library and archives.

An unexpected link, but Yuder shook his head.

“There’s no need to go out of your way to contact them for this, Kanna.”

“I wasn’t planning to. They’ve been a nuisance, trying to form a connection with me ever since the party. I was going to give them a piece of my mind anyway. If I use them for this, wouldnt Count Gallon be of some help to me?”

Kanna seemed quite pleased with her idea. Her stronger, resilient demeanor contrasted sharply with the woman who had once confessed to still experiencing nightmares from her days in the Gallon household.

In the end, Yuder agreed to her plan.

“But you mustn’t act alone. Either I, Gakane, Hinn, or Finn must accompany you.”

“Don’t worry about a thing, Yuder. Just wait for the news I’ll bring!”

Kanna concluded confidently but then softened her eyebrows.

“By the way, why did you seem so out of it earlier?”

The shift in conversation brought Yuder back to thoughts of Kishiar from the day before, plunging him into a dark mental space. Noticing the quick change in Yuder’s expression, Kanna looked as if she suddenly had a hunch about something.

“Uh… S… a… r… e… Worrying… this isn’t it, right?”

“…What did you say?”

The words were stretched so peculiarly that it was hard to understand at once.

“Oh, never mind if you didn’t get it! Ah, I went to see the Commander earlier to report my return to duty today. He looked… kind of tired like you! Everyone must be tired today! Haha. Ha!”

“…”

“…”

Kishiar’s face, which had looked tired since yesterday, flickered in Yuder’s inner eyelids. Had he dreamed that dream again? Was that why he looked so exhausted?

As if her heart had frozen, Kanna exhaled while watching Yuder, a look of concern in her eyes.

“Yuder. If you’re really struggling with something serious, you don’t have to tell me. But you know that I’m always on your side, just like I said before, right?”

Yuder looked at the face of his friend, who was cautiously trying to console him. During a time when he couldn’t focus even in the West due to issues related to Kishiar, Kanna had been his comfort.

Kanna’s abilities were developing at an unprecedented rate. Her ‘Information Reading’ had gone beyond merely perceiving someone’s past actions and could now quickly deduce the most likely scenarios that would soon unfold.

If not for her ability, they wouldn’t have caught the rats that had infiltrated the palace so quickly, and the doors would have been easily breached by surprise attacks.

As Yuder had thought when he first discovered her abilities, Kanna might soon be able to foresee even the distant future, not just the past and present.

When that day comes, the secrets about Yuder Aile's future would also be revealed.

'In fact… she did say she had read something from me that time too.'

However, Kanna hadn't elaborated on it. Yuder thought it was time to know about it, something he had considered should eventually be addressed.

"Kanna."

"Yes?"

"Can I ask you something?"

"Ask away!"

"I want to know what you read from me before."

"…"

Kanna looked as if she wanted to smack her own mouth, which had just said, 'Ask away.'

"Um, Yuder, that thing is, you know… Do we really have to discuss it right now?"

"I appreciate your concern, but I'm fine. Just tell me."

"Uh…"

"I want to know what you know. No, I have to know."

As Kanna wrestled with the dilemma, she looked up as if something had struck her. To Yuder, her bright blue eyes felt like mirrors that could not hide anything.

“…Yuder. Do you think I might have seen something about you that I absolutely shouldn’t have? Is that what you’re so worried about right now?”

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Chapter 566

“…Yuder. Do you think I might have seen something about you that I absolutely shouldn’t have? Is that what you’re so worried about right now?”

The statement was both true and false. Kanna had not yet seen the ‘something’ that Yuder was hiding, the thing she was ‘never supposed to know.’ However, the possibility that she would discover it in the future was quite high.

But the reason Yuder seemed half-lost in thought right now was precisely because a man had seen that ‘something.’ So, in a broader sense, Kanna’s guess was not entirely wrong.

Kanna’s expression, which had succeeded in silencing Yuder more effectively than any torture or weapon, turned incredibly serious.

“Alright, if you’re that concerned about it, I’ll tell you. But understand this: I never intended to read that part of you.”

She wiped the sweat from her forehead as she elaborated on her unexpected activation of her power, which had absolutely no intention behind it.

“So, don’t avoid me or look at me differently after you hear this. I really didn’t want to read into it… you have to believe me.”

“I understand.”

Kanna clenched her fists and took a deep breath. Her eyes tightly shut, she confessed in a whisper.

“…I saw…it.”

“I didn’t catch that, Kanna.”

“I saw the Commander! He was using his mouth to take off your glove!”

Silence. Yuder’s face went blank. Kanna blurted it out like a machine gun.

“And you were touching Commander’s face while wearing that glove! That’s all! When I brushed past you, I only read that part when my fingers touched your glove! Seriously, that’s it!”

Immediately after she finished speaking, Kanna averted her eyes, hiding her face behind her hands. Yuder exhaled a short breath.

Indeed, just as he had suspected during their previous conversation, the information Kanna had read from him had nothing to do with his past life. It was, however, much more intimate and embarrassing than anything he had imagined, going beyond the realm of speculation.

It was a mixed feeling of disbelief and understanding, finally comprehending why Kanna was so reluctant to speak about it.

‘Yes, I remember now. Back in the West, Kishiar did that…’

Back then, Yuder had been deeply distressed because Kishiar had uttered the name ‘Yudrain’ while dreaming.

Recalling that day, Yuder thought of the unshaken gaze of the man who admitted he too was afraid when Yuder said, “Only you make me fearful.”

The passionate intensity he felt at that moment, when Kishiar tore off his glove like a beast and kissed his rough fingertips and scarred knuckles, flooded his thoughts. Those overwhelming emotions were almost unbearable to remember.

Yuder lowered his eyes to his gloved hand.

It felt absurdly real, that he was falling into the same fear he had felt back then.

‘Perhaps… even deeper than before.’

Would Kishiar, who had silently retreated back then, also feel the same? Tormenting himself in familiar agony as he waited?

The moment that thought crossed his mind, his heart, which had felt as though it had frozen solid in the chill and darkness, suddenly stirred.

He knew that he had to face all these walls and pain, that it was his own burden to resolve. Yet, despite knowing that, he wished he could just run to Kishiar, pretending as if nothing ever happened.

If he could live like there were no secrets or barriers between them from the beginning, how wonderful that would be. To wrap himself in the warmth of the familiar scent, to close his eyes without hesitation and fall asleep.

If only he could…

“…Yuder?”

Kanna’s cautious call snapped him out of his reverie.

‘…I know. It’s just a delusion. This isn’t like me.’

Yuder shook off the fleeting fantasy that had filled his head and looked up.

“You’re not… mad at me?”

“Why would I be mad at you? I said I wouldn’t be, didn’t I?”

“…Well, aren’t you uncomfortable about what I read? Or did I misunderstand something? Maybe my ability malfunctioned and the situation wasn’t actually like that…!”

A mix of anxiety, uncertainty, and a strange glimmer of hope were visible in Kanna’s eyes.

It seemed like she would rather hear that there was nothing between Yuder and the Commander, that she had misread something. But that was not the truth.

Yuder thought of his comrades from his past life. By now, most of them would have known the rumors about his involvement with Kishiar. He had grown so accustomed to these stories trailing behind him that Kanna’s cautious attitude toward mentioning his relationship with Kishiar seemed rather peculiar.

Especially since he knew she had kept the fact a secret for so long.

In the past, nobody had ever wanted to know why he was involved with the Commander, nor did anyone understand it was an accident. Yuder himself didn’t want to talk about it, convinced that no one would listen or believe him anyway.

But now was different.

“If it’s not a misunderstanding,” Yuder spoke softly, looking at Kanna.

“Shouldn’t you be the one feeling uncomfortable if everything you read was absolutely correct?”

“No, that’s not it!”

Kanna immediately shook her head.

“I mean, I was shocked, yes. I don’t know how many times I wished I had read it wrong. I even seriously suspected for a moment that you might just be the Commander’s one-night plaything. Considering the rumors and the social status, I agonized over whether it’s really an okay relationship, whether I should just pretend not to know… Oh, no! Anyway, that’s not the point.”

Spouting her unsettling thoughts, Kanna snapped back to her senses upon meeting Yuder’s gaze.

“But when the Commander announced he would dance with you, I couldn’t help but feel he was sincere. And from what I gleaned, your… aura, your emotions… Can I speak about it?”

“There’s no point in keeping secrets anymore.”

“True, but still…”

Her ears flushed, Kanna struggled to finish her sentence.

“It… seemed like… you were… deeply… infatuated with the Commander.”

“…Me?”

“Yes, you! You, Yuder!”

Kanna covered her face again. “Ugh, aaah,” she groaned in agony. She twisted her body, trying to somehow disperse the shock she had received from her own words. It was heartbreaking to see her like this.

The phrase “deeply infatuated” felt incredibly foreign, but upon reflection, it was true. He had already become aware on the day they kissed that he was so out of his mind he couldn’t maintain any distance from Kishiar La Orr.

All the distance he had tried so hard to keep, all the secrets, were crumbling like sand dissolving in water. It would be more strange not to call this state “deeply infatuated.”

“I know you wanted to keep this a secret,” Kanna spoke up. “I really wish I could’ve remained ignorant too. But now that I know, how can I stop seeing it, thinking about it?”

“…”

“I’ll still try to forget it. I won’t ask any more questions than what I’ve seen. I haven’t told anyone, and I swear on my faith, my mother, and my life that it will remain a secret forever. Trust me!”

It seemed unnecessary, but Kanna immediately raised her hand and recited a short vow. She seemed so decisive, as if she had imagined this scenario in her head hundreds of times.

“Ah, saying it out loud is really refreshing.”

After her vow, Kanna seemed almost entirely back to her usual self. Although her ears were still red, she seemed genuinely relieved.

And oddly enough, through this conversation, he felt a little lighter, as if a weight had lifted from his chest. Even though he knew that none of his real concerns had been resolved.

So, after some hesitation, he spoke.

“Kanna.”

“Hm?”

“I thought you might have read deeper into me.”

“Is there something deeper than this?”

Kanna’s eyes trembled without restraint.

“Yes, there is. A lot.”

“Not even one?”

“Finding out someone else’s secret isn’t a good feeling. But even if that day comes, I want to…”

He hesitated for a moment.

“… continue to be with you just like now.”

He was well aware that it was a selfish wish, much like it was with Kishiar.

“…”

“Thank you for agreeing to be on my side. My heart feels lighter because of it.”

Kanna, who had been shaking her hand as if asking what could be deeper than this, suddenly froze. A sudden moisture appeared in her big eyes as she stared blankly at him.

He thought she was about to cry, but Kanna didn’t shed a tear. She swiftly covered her eyes, and under her hand, her lips broke into a smile that was wider and brighter than ever before.

“Ah, what’s this? You’re not like yourself when you say things like that, Yuder. But, me too.”

“…”

“I was really worried you’d distance yourself from me after experiencing my ability. Thank you for not doing that. Whatever you’re hiding, whatever I end up reading, nothing will change. Because what you wish for is what I wish for too!”

With newfound confidence in her improved ability control, Kanna reached out and grasped his hand, shaking it vigorously. It felt like it had been an eternity since they had this sort of physical contact.

“Like you said earlier, finding out something you didn’t want to know isn’t always good. But isn’t living in ignorance not entirely happy either? That’s how I try to think about my ability.”

Her final words left ripples in his heart.

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Chapter 567

“Like you said earlier, finding out something you didn’t want to know isn’t always good. But isn’t living in ignorance not entirely happy either? That’s how I try to think about my ability.”

Her final words left ripples in Yuder’s heart.

‘Knowing everything isn’t necessarily good, but living in ignorance isn’t blissful either.’

If one didn’t even realize their own ignorance, could they truly be free in their quest for truth? Yuder himself was consumed by the desire to know the truth about his past life.

And within that truth, there were things that Kishiar from his past life had not revealed to him.

‘I remember feeling really frustrated back then when Kishiar wouldn’t tell me anything.’

Where Kishiar went during late nights, why he handed over command to Yuder and left for Peletta but would secretly return when least expected, whether he had really been planning a rebellion… All the questions that a younger Yuder had once been curious about began to flood his mind.

Yuder had defied Emperor Katchian to give Kishiar a chance because he wanted to know. And he probably felt frustrated every time he saw Kishiar, precisely because he wasn’t happy living in ignorance.

All of this was the result of the desire to know.

Even now, that feeling persisted, despite having forgotten much and trying to forget even more since his death. He wouldn’t be like this if he didn’t genuinely have regrets.

Yes, Kanna was absolutely right.

Living in ignorance isn’t blissful.

‘And Kishiar must feel the same way now.’

Just as Yuder began to undergo changes after learning fragments of the truth about his past life, Kishiar too would not be able to escape this fate, now that he knew some of Yuder’s secrets.

The man who enjoyed intellectual games and the thrill of breaking down barriers, and who laughed joyfully while doing so, would act differently, especially around Yuder. And Yuder knew this better than anyone.

What he knew was not limited to emotions. The biggest difference between his previous and current life was that all lingering hesitations between them had vanished, and they knew each other even physically.

Yuder began to think back to the times when he’d passionately desired his counterpart, ignoring everything else in his current life. He recalled the moments when he’d discovered just how far he could go just because he wanted something and how much of the other person he could desirethese moments were filled with both ecstasy and tears.

It was far more than a mere physical encounter. He couldn’t dismiss what he had feltthe oneness, the shared painwhile being continuously intertwined.

Yuder pondered for a long time.

‘Alright… let’s admit that waiting for the situation to turn completely in my favor is excessive greed.’

After all, the world had never been kind to Yuder. While Kishiar and the Emperor might have had their share of luck, Yuder himself was more familiar with misfortune than fortune.

And in the face of such unpredictable misfortunes, Yuder’s response had always been the sameto simply maintain his usual self and to avoid unnecessary complications.

let’s not overcomplicate things. Yuder decided to set aside his burgeoning fear and retreat, opting to assess the situation he found himself in with a cool head.

While this incident has been embarrassing, if I think about it, it’s actually surprising that everything has gone more or less as expected up until now. No one knows what will happen tomorrow.

Even if Yuder managed to discover everything right away, how Kishiar would react after learning the truth of his dream was unknown. There was no benefit in avoiding the uncertainties.

Kishiar saw not his own death but mine in his vision. Given that Kishiar himself still has many questions, it might be fortunate for me to bring up my side first.

Certainly, Kishiar would ponder over various speculations he had made up till now. However, Yuder resolved not to become mired in questions without clear answers.

I initially wanted to understand everything from my end and have a frank discussion, but given how things have turned out, there’s no helping it. Anyway, no matter what happens, it can’t be worse than my past life.

The thought that his situation couldn’t get worse than before surprisingly lent him a measure of positivity.

The reason I can afford such idle concerns is because I’ve grown too accustomed to this excessive warmth. My present contentment has sprouted excessive desire.

In his past life, there hadn’t even been time for Yuder and Kishiar to step back and think things through. Everything had ended before he could truly understand who Kishiar was and what he thought of Yuder. But now, at least, there was no such worry. Hadn’t he strived for this all along?

As Kishiar always says, one has to be alive to accomplish anything.

Even if Kishiar chose differently after learning the truth, that fact remained unchangeable.

I’ll do what I can do now. And trust Kishiar, whom I’ve observed thus far.

Having concluded, Yuder stood up.

“Commander, it’s Yuder Aile.”

He knocked rhythmically on the Commander’s door and opened it. Kishiar, who, according to Kanna, should have been there just a moment ago, was not in sight. The coat usually hanging on the coat rack, which Kishiar wore when he worked, was also missingevidence that the Commander had been out for some time.

Where could he be?

Yuder cautiously scanned the room and noticed something different. A transparent sword stand that usually held the divine sword was empty.

The divine sword is missing. Did he take it with him?

To where? No place came to mind.

“…Sir Aile?”

At that moment, a familiar voice sounded from behind him. It was Nathan Zuckerman. Yuder wasted no time in asking.

“Where did the Commander go with the divine sword?”

“The Pope requested a discussion with him and the divine sword, so he’s gone to the audience chamber.”

“Did he go alone?”

“He went with some other members of the Cavalry.”

As if saying, ‘Didn’t you know?’ the southern knight looked at Yuder with a faint hint of puzzlement. Finally, Yuder breathed a sigh of relief.

…Alright, given the circumstances, it’s only natural that he’d go with others, especially since I haven’t returned to duty yet. I showed unnecessary concern.

“Understood. Thank you for informing me.”

“Please have a seat.”

The person who stopped Yuder as he was about to leave was unexpectedly Nathan Zuckerman. The knight put down the papers he had been holding and gestured toward the sofa.

“Since he’ll be back soon anyway, it would be better for you to wait while having some tea. I also have something to discuss with you, so let’s talk briefly.”

“Understood.”

Nathan Zuckerman had something to say to him? The possibilities were either too many or none at allit was a conundrum. Yuder quietly sat down where Nathan had indicated.

A few moments later, a man adeptly brewed tea leaves and set down a teacup in front of Yuder, which looked somewhat small compared to the size of his hand. Some snacks were also brought in from somewhere.

Yuder didn’t touch the snacks but lifted the teacup instead. For a while, not a word was exchanged between the two. Just as a mild curiosity began to arise about who would speak first, Nathan Zuckerman finally broke the silence.

“The Duke has been making some unusual requests since yesterday.”

“What kind of requests?”

“He asked for sleeping pills, which he had stopped taking since becoming an Awakener. He also took some headache medicine. He even ordered me to bring old historical books based on scriptures and grimoires written in ancient script. These were rare books, primarily designated as restricted and unavailable outside the imperial library.”

””

“I suspect that these strange requests are somehow connected to Sir Aile. What do you think?”

Sleeping pills, headache medicine, and restricted books.

Each was surprising in its own way.

‘So Kishiar has… continued to have those dreams?’

Despite the fragrant aroma rising from his tea, Yuder couldn’t discern its flavor. After a lengthy silence, he nodded.

“It seems your suspicions are likely correct, Sir Zuckerman.”

“You once told me to always be cautious and do my utmost to protect the Duke.”

””

“The Duke wished for me not to give any advice regarding this matter, so ordinarily, I should have kept my mouth shut. However, right now, I’m telling you this as a precaution.”

With a stern and impassive face, the southern knight spoke quietly.

“There are times when I think you might already know everything there is to know about not only this Cavalry and the Peletta Knight Order but also about me, the Duke, and others. It’s an absurd thought, but sometimes, intuition goes beyond what’s visible.”

For a moment, the air between the two seemed to freeze. Yuder listened intently to Nathan’s words.

“I don’t doubt the Duke has had similar thoughts. Yet the fact he says nothing suggests that whoever you are, whatever you are, doesn’t matter.”

””

The heavily weighted words burrowed deep into his ears.

“I’ve placed the items the Duke requested under that desk over there. You’re the only one who can understand his intentions after examining them, so take a look and make your judgment.”

Yuder rose from his seat and walked toward the spot Nathan had indicated. Indeed, hidden from casual view were a few stacks of books and documents.

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Chapter 568

“I’ve placed the items the Duke requested under that desk over there. You’re the only one who can understand his intentions after examining them, so take a look and make your judgment.”

Yuder rose from his seat and walked towards the area indicated. Indeed, there were stacks of books and papers hidden in a place unlikely to catch anyone’s eye.

Surveying them, Yuder noted that each item emitted a stale, half-rotten smell. He picked up a few of the closest books.

The text was in an ancient language he barely understood, but fortunately, the titles also had small translations in the modern script, making them easy enough to understand.

‘<The Age of the First Chapter of the Holy Book. How Did Divine Power Resurrect a Ten-fold Torn Limb? Taboo Experiments with Divine Power> <Magic that Transcends Death: Evidence and ExaminationHuman Subjects> <Human Time and Divine Time> <Methodological Magic for the Perfect Preservation of Life and Death>’

At first glance, it seemed as if the topics were randomly selected. But that couldn’t possibly be true. The person who had ordered these books must have had a clear reason for choosing them.

Yuder set them back down and quickly skimmed through the titles of other books and papers. Aside from a few that had no titles, most were on similar themes.

“Healing, death, protection, and time,” Yuder muttered, naming the recurring terms.

‘Time was a subject I mentioned in Duke Tain’s experimental diary that caught my attention, but the rest are’

Books that seemed to explore taboo methods for absolute protection or escaping from death through potent healing were the majority. There was only one conclusion to be drawn from this.

It seemed as though Kishiar was not seeking to understand why Yuder appeared as a condemned man in his dream. Rather, he was looking for a way to prevent such an event from ever happening again, or a solution if it did. He was even willing to peruse these dangerous books to find it.

Yuder picked up the book ‘<Methodological Magic for the Perfect Preservation of Life and Death>’ once more.

It was one of the few whose title was not written in ancient text. The title sounded reasonable, and he thought the content would be easy to read. Surprisingly, the book was filled with more illustrations than text, all of which were absurdly cruel and gruesome.

Yuder frowned involuntarily as he skimmed through the horrific images.

Whoever wrote this book had an unscrupulous mind; no sane person could glean anything from it. The only ones who might were psychopathic killers or equally deranged mages who wrote books like this for the sake of pleasure.

Without uttering a word, Yuder slammed the book shut and tossed it aside harshly.

‘Some of the books here might not be forbidden texts, but this one definitely is. It’s clear why it was banned.’

He had only skimmed one, but his desire to investigate further had entirely vanished.

Yuder took a long, deep breath to calm his emotions.

At the very least, it was clear that Kishiar La Orr had a certain level of determination in seeking answers about the recent dream.

It was undeniable that he was keeping all possibilities open, without any limitations.

In search of an answer solely for Yuder's sake, a heavy sense of resolve weighed down on his shoulders. Unconsciously, Yuder closed his eyes.

"…I can hear the carriage approaching. It seems they have returned."

Nathan Zuckerman broke the silence, as if he had been waiting for Yuder to absorb all he could from the books. Though Yuder heard nothing, he trusted the Swordmaster's keen senses, far beyond that of any ordinary man.

Kishiar, who had left for the Grand Temple, would soon return. Yuder returned the book to its original place on the shelf.

"Thank you for your counsel, Sir Zuckerman."

"Have you made your decision?"

"I had intended to discuss something with the Commander upon his return, regardless. But without having seen these books, I would have had difficulty confirming the rightness of my coming here."

Whether he read the books or not, Yuder's intended course of action wouldn't have changed. But knowing he hadn't arrived too late brought a different sense of relief.

"So, if there's nothing pressing on your end, Sir Zuckerman, could you return later?"

Nathan Zuckerman’s gaze met Yuder’s. The faithful knight rose silently, bowing his head before departing.

“Very well.”

Left alone, Yuder looked around the Commander’s office. The room, arranged according to Kishiar’s tastes, was a place both were intimately familiar with, having spent countless hours together.

Closing his eyes, Yuder could vividly recall every object’s location. Following this trail of memories, he stopped in front of an ornately curved drawer.

As he opened the first compartment, an organized array of items caught his eye. Without hesitation, Yuder picked up one and headed for the table.

“Well, Commander. We shall take our leave now.”

The door opened, and in came the voice of Steiber Rendley, the Deputy Commander of Sul Division, who was unable to conceal his excitement. The tall man who had come in halted his steps upon spotting the shadow seated behind the coal stove.

“You’re here.”

“I felt someone was waiting, but naturally assumed it would be Nathan.”

“Unfortunately, it’s me,” Yuder responded, emotionless. Kishiar, in the process of removing his outer garment, smiled faintly.

“Unfortunate? This is more like an unexpected stroke of luck, isn’t it?”

It was the first time they had seen each other and the first conversation they had since yesterday. Although it felt strangely like

meeting after a long absence, everything also flowed seamlessly, as if nothing had ever happened.

“I heard you went to the Grand Temple. Summoned by the Pope, I believe?”

“Yes. He wanted to meet the new master of the divine sword personally.”

“And what did he say?”

“He said he was pleased to meet the new master of the divine sword before departing for God’s side.”

“That’s surprisingly straightforward approval. Others might not have been so pleased.”

The current Pope was extremely old and not one to explicitly express his political opinions. To put it kindly, he was a quiet and devout man; otherwise, one could say he maintained a neutral stance, refraining from intervening in any conflict.

“The meeting was supposed to be a private one, but oddly enough, word got around and many people insisted on joining. It made it easier for me to prove that I am indeed the master of the divine sword. All I had to do was unsheathe it in front of a host of witnesses.”

Yuder immediately grasped the implications behind the words.

So the Papal side intended to keep today’s meeting highly confidential. However, thanks to some fortuitous rumors, they had no choice but to acknowledge it after seeing him drawing the divine sword in front of everyone, he thought.

The source of those ‘fortuitous rumors’ was not hard to guess.

It must be a collaboration between the Emperor and Kishiar, Yuder concluded.

If only the Pope and his close associates knew this, it might have stayed a rumor. But others had witnessed it too, dispelling any notion that it was merely hearsay. Kishiar had walked the path he was meant to take, looking remarkably relaxed, as if he couldn't possibly be bolstered by sedatives and headache medicine.

"What's the reason you've waited for me this far? And what's this about a tactical game board?" Kishiar inquired.

The man who unsheathed the sword and placed it on top of the magic stone stove approached Yuder. His shadow flickered, growing larger and smaller as it danced in front of the multicolored flames of the magic stone stove.

"I have something to discuss with you, Commander. But this caught my eye," Yuder replied.

"It wasn't exactly placed conspicuously," the man retorted.

"It caught my eye nevertheless," Yuder insisted.

Yuder tapped the tactical game board and pieces that he had taken from Kishiar's drawer. Kishiar's eyes momentarily narrowed as he observed the board, perfectly arranged according to the rules they followed when playing the game.

"You said you learned a little as a child, but you seem rather well-acquainted with it," Kishiar observed.

"It's no lie," Yuder confirmed.

By Yuder's standards, considering it was a game he had learned ten years ago in his previous life, stating it as a childhood memory

wasn’t wrong. He hadn’t enjoyed the game since Kishiar’s passing, so in a way, he had only learned it for its cultural significance.

Kishiar reached for a game piece representing a lord that was closest to him. As he did, an old imperial adage slipped from his lips, “There’s no tool like a tactical game for simplifying matters.”

In his previous life, Kishiar had taught Yuder the tactical game, uttering the same adage.

It is said that Farnacius, the genius strategist during the era of Secret Emperor always played a tactical game when discussing important matters. Sometimes, playing a game can be helpful for an honest exchange.

Of course, Yuder hadn’t agreed with this, promptly forgetting it shortly after hearing it. However, when he decided that today was the day for an important conversation, that saying was the first thing that came to mind.

“Alright, let’s play after a long while,” Yuder agreed.

Without asking further, Kishiar took a seat opposite Yuder.

His golden hair, usually impeccably styled, now slightly disheveled and covering his forehead, captured Yuder’s attention.

Yuder picked up a black piece laid in front of him.

“Let’s begin, then,” he announced.

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Chapter 569

“Let us begin then.”

The original name of the tactical game was ‘Imuran Yute Mesis.’ A complex and lengthy name derived from archaic words, few ever pronounced it correctly.

The game’s pieces consisted of eight types, twenty-four in total. When played by two people, most often two types would be excluded, leaving six types with eighteen pieces. Yuder surveyed the set before him: a king, a general, a minister, a knight, a priest, and a common piece.

Made from smoothly polished stones with wave-like patterns, Yuder had handled these pieces multiple times in his previous life, when he had learned the game.

When Kishiar left his position as Commander to go to Peletta, he had left most of his belongings in his office, including these pieces. Yuder subsequently tucked the unused game board into a drawer, never to take it out again as Kishiar never took his position again.

It was strange how, even though these were certainly the first pieces he had touched in this new life, they still felt familiar in his hands.

White and black pieces. The view of the Commander’s office where they both sat facing each other. And Kishiar La Orr before him. Everything was both the same and different.

Yuder moved a piece. As he advanced a common piece, Kishiar also lifted his hand and moved his white common piece. The graceful way Kishiar held the piece, the expressionless look on his face until he placed it down, everything was as Yuder remembered.

‘Yes… you may not know, but I do.’

How Kishiar initiated the game to lightly gauge his opponent’s intentions. Which pieces he used under what circumstances. How he moved each type of piece. Yuder knew it all.

Information gleaned from the countless games he had played with Kishiar resurfaced in his mind, one by one. Without hesitation, Yuder dove back into those familiar patterns.

Snap. The white piece Kishiar placed was promptly captured by Yuder’s black piece. Then, another white piece behind it attempted to seize the opportunity through sacrifice. But even that move was anticipated, and the black piece gracefully dodged it.

Though Kishiar seemed to take his time placing his pieces, Yuder barely hesitated as he swiftly countered each move. As a result, the game progressed unusually quickly.

After losing three pieces in quick succession, Kishiar finally paused and slowly spoke, his eyes fixed on the board.

“This Youre not thinking about tactics and strategy before moving, arent you?”

His gaze shifted to Yuder’s hand, and then to his face.

“It seems more like you’re anticipating my moves and countering accordingly.”

For a moment, a thrilling sensation coursed through Yuder’s heart.

‘As expected.’

He had believed that Kishiar La Orr could discern the hidden truth from this game alone.

Hiding his rapidly beating heart, Yuder tightened his grip on his piece.

“Would you like to concede defeat?”

“No. That’s not an option.”

Kishiar placed a new piece. The piece landed on the board with a click, its orientation subtly different from before.

“Let’s see how you respond to this move, shall we?”

This time, Kishiar made an unusual move with his priest piecea piece that traditionally stayed between the king and the general and scarcely moved until the game’s latter half. It was as if he had thrown out this piece to see how well Yuder could read him, employing a tactic he wouldn’t usually use.

True, the usual Kishiar would never play such a move.

A typical person might have assumed that Kishiar had recklessly played a suicidal move and would immediately take advantage of the opening by advancing other pieces. But Yuder did the opposite. He also deployed his priest piece, positioning it to protect the other pieces on the board.

If I had advanced, I would’ve been captured instantly. I already know he’s adept at using his priest piece when pretending to be careless, all the while hiding a knife behind his back.

A faint smile crossed Kishiar’s lips when he realized Yuder had once again seen through his move.

“So you’ve figured this out as well. Then”

All of a sudden, Kishiar’s pieces began to move haphazardly across the board. The movement seemed random, as if meant solely

to create chaos. Half the moves appeared genuinely thoughtless, like they were just to sow confusion, while the other half were deceptive moves with hidden intent. The board became as chaotic as if played by children learning the game for the first time.

From that moment on, Yuder also took more time to think about his moves. The number of his black pieces being captured by the white pieces began to increase. Yuder briefly exhaled, watching his black pieces fall one after another to Kishiar's rapidly moving hand.

Creating chaos to keep me from reading his strategy makes his task doubly difficult. Yet, he's managed this far.

Should he credit that to Kishiar being Kishiar? Although the odds were clearly in Yuder's favor, he felt a hint of peril. Kishiar's skill at quickly swinging the board's momentum in his favor was indeed remarkable. Had Yuder shown even a trace of confusion or made an error, he might have lost control of the game.

But that can't be a reason for me to lose.

Yuder meticulously recalled how Kishiar played in their previous games and matched his moves accordingly. No matter how chaotic the board became, the strategy was still fundamentally Kishiar's.

The answer was definitely in his memory.

The black pieces advanced unabated across the chaotic board. The two sets of pieces, facing off and baring their teeth, seemed almost mirror images of each other.

After Yuder effortlessly captured the chaotic pieces, Kishiar was left with too few pieces to turn the tide. The most straightforward path to victory was now clear: capture Kishiar's last remaining king piece, called "Imum."

Yuder toppled Kishiar's king piece and declared the end.

“I declare victory.”

“How unfortunate.”

Kishiar smiled and dropped his last remaining common piece. Yuder furrowed his brow, realizing that if that piece had moved as planned, it would have taken his own Imum, his king piece.

“When did that piece get there?”

Even if Yuder lost a king, it couldn’t compare to Kishiar losing both his. But if this were a real war, it wouldn’t have been an entirely satisfying victory, having lost one of his king pieces.

Yuder silently gazed at the man before him who had managed to get this far in a situation where he was at a disadvantage, facing an opponent who seemed to read him all too well, and on top of that, without having slept properly. Kishiar broke the silence, his tone tinged with jest.

“Shouldn’t you be happier about winning?”

It was his first victory in this game, but he hadn’t won by fighting his way; he didn’t start the game to win in the first place. Therefore, he had no reason to be jubilant.

“You of all people know that I didn’t truly fight,” Yuder retorted.

Kishiar responded with a silent chuckle.

“In the second round, we’ll use special pieces.”

Yuder sorted the two sets of pieces by color once more. This time, the board was rotated so that the white tiles came to him and the black tiles went to Kishiar. Before starting the game, each placed their tiles in their respective positions and secretly selected a special piece.

Yuder picked one of the standard tiles and designated it as a special piece, then set it back in place.

‘Kishiar’s special piece will most likely be the knight tile,’ he thought.

The second game commenced.

“Not applying the special piece rule in the first round was your way of showing how well you understand all this, wasn’t it?” Kishiar made the first move, his piece meeting the board with a small clack.

“You know exactly how I play this game, don’t you?”

“Yes,” Yuder acknowledged, sending his own piece out to meet Kishiar’s. Clack.

“That’s a separate matter from skill,” he added. Clack.

“If you already know your enemy, you won’t struggle,” Kishiar declared. Clack.

“Yes. And that dream is similar to this for me,” Yuder spoke up. Silence.

Kishiar’s fingertips, which were to move the next piece, hesitated for a moment. Yuder kept his gaze fixed on the piece in front of him as he continued speaking.

“The dream you saw signifies the end of a game I lost. Are you not going to make your next move?”

“…I was momentarily contemplating a clever move,” Kishiar finally said, his fingers picking up a piece and placing it gently on the board. Yet the sound of the tile meeting the board this time was softer, almost inaudible.

Without waiting, Yuder quickly grabbed his own piece and moved it. Clack.

“I may not be very good at games, but I’ve never lost the same way twice. I intend to keep it that way this time as well,” Yuder declared.

Kishiar picked up a new tile, and with a slow motion, his fingers let out another soft clack as he placed it on the board.

“…But you have lost before.”

“Nobody wins every game they play,” Yuder countered.

“The way you played earlier, it was the way of someone accustomed to it after overcoming numerous defeats,” Kishiar lifted his head.

“That’s my way,” he affirmed.

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Chapter 570

In the brief meeting of their eyes, indescribable emotions flickered and passed.

The way Yuder had played the game so far was a mirror image of Kishiar’s own style. It was fundamentally different from mere perceptiveness or cunning.

Every move Yuder made, every piece he laid down without a moment’s hesitation, even the choices he made when selecting his strategyall resonated with how Kishiar would have acted.

Neither flinched when employing rarely-used self-destructive moves or deliberately flawed plays that seemed to forfeit victory. A shiver pierced through Kishiar as if he were facing another version of himself.

Could anyone truly mimic another’s behavior in unpredictable situationseven small habitsto such an extent, even if they already knew the future?

No, this was something beyond human senses, beyond evidence. It was as if an old callus, formed over many years and perfectly melded to the body, had appeared.

Therefore, this was neither the result of insight nor foresight.

Things that couldnt be comprehended by logic alone amalgamated, spreading across the hexagonal board like a universe encapsulated in a small array of tiles.

Kishiar recalled the numerous surreal feelings he’d had since meeting Yuder, and all the enigmatic remarks Yuder had made. The moments when he understood with his heart, not his head, what it

meant to desire a future. Those desires, ambitions, and the connections that no one else could see.

Everything he couldnt figure out, had set aside, or hadnt known all mixed together in his thoughts.

Each thought had originally been like a frail, thin thread. But as they all came together to form a single conclusion, those fragile threads twisted into a robust, unbreakable tapestry.

Clutching the piece tightly, Kishiar summed it up in one sentence:

“The person who taught you this game was me, wasn’t it?”

It was an extraordinary conclusion.

Yet, if the result stood before one’s eyes, it was impossible not to believe. From the moment they had met, their world had contained no impossibilities.

Yuder put down his piece on the board in front of the waiting Kishiar.

Snap.

“Yes.”

In that moment, the gaps between Yuder’s white tiles perfectly closed, completing a beautiful formation.

It was a regular tile that normally couldn’t move in that direction. However, beneath the tile Yuder placed, a symbol glowed, indicating a special tile.

It was the ‘Formation of Wings,’ the strategy Kishiar had first learned and preferred in tactical games.

Originally, the formation involved an arduous and complex task: advancing pieces that should retreat and retreating pieces that should advance. Only then did it radiate its true potentiala tactical formation that enveloped the opponent without them realizing, reversed the colors both inside and out, and struck like a blazing fire, symbolizing a miraculous victory.

For a long time, both Kishiar and Yuder couldnt take their eyes off the completed formation.

“Actually, this is the first time Ive successfully completed this formation since learning it,” Yuder quietly spoke.

“You like the Formation of Wings, dont you?”

“I do.”

Though he had never admitted this to anyone, Kishiar’s voice dropped to an almost inaudible murmur. Yuder averted his eyes from Kishiars trembling crimson pupils.

Through the small world of a tactical game, Kishiar had come to fully grasp the secrets of Yuder.

It was not a simple vision or information existing in the current timeline that haunted Kishiar’s dreams, but a different future that had already transpired yet would never come.

The reasons behind all the actions Yuder had taken thus far alone.

And even where the enigmatic way Yuder presented evidence had originated from.

The answer was simple, but believing it was not. And even if one did believe, how to perceive it was uncertain.

Yet, the man before him…

Kishiar looked at Yuder with a sorrowful, but not angry, gaze. The slightest flicker in those consistently calm eyes shook Yuder's heart without a sound.

He truly believed everything Yuder had shown him, and it seemed he had easily guessed why Yuder had finally decided to reveal it all.

Yuder saw him set down the piece he had been holding, outside of the board.

"I concede defeat."

With a heavy voice, the second game ended in Kishiar's forfeit. Yet neither touched the formation completed on the board.

"In the dream, I was you, but not you," Kishiar's voice softly echoed out of nowhere.

Yuder immediately realized this must be more detail about his own death, vaguely dreamt by Kishiar.

"When the dream kept recurring, when the darkness gradually lightened, and after seeing the reflections in the eyes of those leading the way, I finally knew who it was."

Even then, when he didn't want to be sure.

"All I could think of was stopping it if it were to happen later. But what scared me more was…"

Kishiar hesitated for a moment, then met Yuder's eyes.

"The irrational speculation that it might have already happened to you, and you came to me after everything had ended without my knowledge. If all has already occurred, and my hands now can do

nothing, how could I possibly save you? That thought alone filled my head so much…”

His choked voice briefly stopped, then continued with a bitter smile.

“…I hadnt felt this powerless since I first arrived in Peletta.”

A young Kishiar mentioned by the mage Hellem popped into Yuders mind. Even just a fragment of a story heard directly from Kishiar’s lips provided a suffocating sensation.

“You didn’t seem to show it,” Yuder finally said.

“I was confident I could hide it. Although it seems that’s not working too well these days,” Kishiar responded, joking but without humor.

Yuder kept silent for a while before asking dryly, “So, how do you feel now that you’ve finally found the answer?”

“I was just thinking that the old saying about truth losing its taste the closer you get to it isn’t wrong.”

“Truth be told, I came here prepared for you to expel me in anger, citing deceit.”

“I thought I knew all of my own habits, yet it appears I still don’t know myself that well,” Kishiar said with a faint smile.

“Exercising caution with unbelievable answers isn’t deceit; it’s a virtue. Wasn’t it me who said I wanted to find the answer to the secret you hold?”

“…”

“Of course, Im angry and its incredibly painful, but that emotion isnt directed at you. How could it be?”

When he spoke those words, his eyes were colder and more distant than ever before. Yet that gaze vanished in an instant, leaving only a look of desperate yearning directed at Yuder.

“There’s only one answer I wish to convey to you. A gratitude for enduring all the moments leading to this answer, for standing in front of me, alive and breathing.”

Gratitude.

“And if you would allow me, the powerless desire of a man in love to hold you, as you are now.”

And desire.

Every word that flowed from Kishiar’s lips felt as if it were on fire, searing and painful. If words had temperature, Yuder would have been reduced to ashes by now.

“May I go there now?”

Yuder closed his eyes and then opened them, answering not with words, but by pushing the chair away from him first.

The moment Yuder tightly yet gently hugged Kishiar’s neck, a flood of indescribable emotions washed over himfears and dark worries that he’d carried this far, and all the unfamiliar, desperate trembles that he’d thought had corroded away in the past.

If this was love, Yuder most certainly loved Kishiar.

Neither could say anything more.

They simply held each other, inhaling deeply as if they were one.

“Since I’ve won again, may I make another request?”

Some time later, Yuder asked for one thing while nestled in Kishiar's arms. Regardless of winning or losing, Kishiar would have probably granted any request, but Yuder insisted on stating a reason anyway.

"Go on."

"Please return those useless forbidden texts. The answer lies with me, not within those books."

"…Nathan told you, didn't he?"

"He told me in order to keep me on my guard. It's a brilliant decision befitting him. Don't say anything."

Kishiar's lips twisted in a bitter smile.

"It's not just the forbidden texts. There are also diaries and records from the First Empresses and palace women from the First Emperor's time. Rare documents you won't find unless you're searching the palace archives."

"I wasn't aware of that. Still, please return the forbidden texts. No matter how much we read about forbidden magic that artificially preserves the flayed, it'll be useless."

"I understand."

Kishiar, who had agreed to do so, looked down at the board he'd left mid-game.

"It's a shame we'll never see this again once it's put away."

Yuder interpreted the melancholy in those words a little differently.

"Don't worry, this won't end with just two games. A third match can be requested at any time."

“That’s not what I meant, but…actually, upon consideration, perhaps taking our time to start a new game might provide a better opportunity for conversation.”

The man who had been contemplating turned the board once again.

“Very well. Let’s restart the game. But this time, for every fallen piece, you have to answer one of my questions. What do you say?”

“Sounds good.”

Yuder had no intention of ending the conversation at this point either. If the game could facilitate the dialogue, then that was even better.

“Since I lost the last round, shall I go first again?”

“Well, either side can go first, but If we’re to play the game, shouldn’t you let me move to the opposite side? You’ll have to let go of me, won’t you?”

To restart the game, they would have to return to their original positions. Yet the man who had Yuder sitting on his lap showed no sign of letting go.

“Wouldn’t it be fine to keep this posture, as long as we’re not applying any special rules?”

“How could it be fine? It’s uncomfortable to make moves from this distance.”

“You can just rotate the board.”

“If you insist”

Though it was somewhat baffling, in the end, the two of them ended up in the ludicrous act of sitting together and playing a tactical

game.

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Chapter 571

“Shall we begin the third round?”

Yuder’s arm extended to spin the board effortlessly. Kishiar gracefully placed a white piece atop the now half-turned board.

It was the same move, at the same spot, as Kishiar had chosen to initiate the first game. Yuder’s eyes flicked momentarily to the man’s face.

‘He isn’t planning to concede this time around, obviously.’

Yuder had won both of the previous games, but to be accurate, it was more like Kishiar had willingly walked the path of defeat.

The fact that Kishiar had chosen the same initial move for the third game could only mean one thing.

‘He wants to show his true style of gameplay now and compare it distinctly with what came before.’

Yuder took a short breath and rotated the board, picking up a black piece. He laid it down with a touch slower, yet more deliberate than in previous games. Kishiar’s lips curled faintly at the corners, noticing the piece’s position.

Then Kishiar spun the board again and made his next move. Yuder, too, looked intently at the board before placing his subsequent piece. The clattering sound of the stone pieces against the board echoed, mingling irregularly with the sound of the spinning board.

“…”

The tension that had been palpable at the start between the two players seemed to wane, but this time it was Yuder's black piece that was first to fall.

Yuder narrowed his eyes as he watched Kishiar pick up the black piece.

This meant it was time for Kishiar to ask his first question.

'What will he ask first?'

It was hard to guess just how far Kishiar's sharp mind had gone, now that he had the crucial answer in hand.

'The most likely question would be how I exist in this moment. That's what I would have asked too…'

"How old were you then?"

"…Excuse me?"

However, the question shattered Yuder's expectations.

"I have two dreams that I remember clearly. One where you were awkwardly practicing with a sword, and the other one… well, you know what it is."

Kishiar's eyes momentarily darkened as he referenced the moment when Yuder had been standing in front of a guillotine.

"While I can't be certain when the last dream took place, it definitely wasn't when you were practicing basic swordsmanship. If you were about the same age as you are now while practicing the sword, then during that moment… you definitely seemed more mature. Of course, you're an adult now, but you know what I'm trying to say."

The accuracy of his insight was eerie.

If Kishiar had deduced Yuder’s identity from just a fleeting and blurry moment in a dream, how deep had he looked into it?

Faced with this unexpected first question, a blend of surprise and hesitation naturally arose. However, Yuder swallowed it all.

“As you said, Commander, I was the same age when practicing swordsmanship as I am now. And during that last moment… I was eleven years older.”

“Thirty-one.”

Kishiar mumbled, confirming the age.

“Yes.”

“So, you’re actually older than me now.”

Technically… that would be correct.

The reason why Yuder, who had returned from death, did not regard Kishiar as a distant figure, was not only because he had once stood at the pinnacle of power where the status of an imperial family member or a Duke was not scary to him. His accrued wisdom with age played a significant role as well.

Even so, Yuder didn’t feel about Kishiar as he had about the other members he’d encountered againa young junior Awakener he should guide and take care of. Rather, he was more struck by the robustness, youth, and warmth that flowed from Kishiar, a far cry from the dim memories of their previous lives.

As a result, the temporal distance Yuder felt between himself and Kishiar was in a peculiar state; it was simultaneously similar and dissimilar to their relationship in their previous life.

Caught in the uncertainty of how to describe this, Yuder remained silent until Kishiar abruptly broke the quiet.

“If you ever wish to be treated as older than me, just say the word. I’m fine either way.”

“I’ve never wanted that. I’ve never felt you were younger than me, either. Treating me as you do now is sufficient.”

“My assistant really is devoid of greed.”

Even in this Cavalry, where Steiber, the oldest member, received no such seniority treatment, why would Kishiar say something like this? The intention was somewhat suspect, but Yuder had just acquired a new piece.

“Since it appears your question has concluded, I’ll make my next move.”

The board turned once more. The black pieces, exuding a momentum entirely different from the previous game, charged forcefully toward the white pieces. It was a familiar strategy that Yuder had always favored: a tile leading from the front to disturb the enemy while protecting the rest.

A knight piece with exceptional mobility, a general piece capable of unconventional moves to protect others, and common pieces lying in wait, ready to capitalize on opportunitiesthese were his instruments.

“Indeed, this is how you should place them.”

Kishiar mumbled as he keenly observed Yuder’s moves, not missing a single one.

“A strategy that reflects you. Utilizing a few capable pieces to protect the weaker ones and create a beautiful cooperative

formation.”

”””

“It’s ideal and excellent, but the pieces in the front are also more susceptible to danger. Especially against someone like me.”

As he finished speaking, Kishiar took one of Yuder’s pieces and knocked it down. The spinning board wobbled and came to a halt.

“Here’s my second question. In the ‘failed game,’ did one of our king pieces ultimately pass away?”

Had Emperor Keilusa of their previous life met the same fate without encountering a miracle like this one? Was that why Yuder had so recklessly asserted that the Emperor must live, with a conviction that not even the Emperor himself was privy to?

It was a heavy question filled with various implications, and once again, Yuder found it difficult to answer. He looked down, maintaining his silence before finally shaking his head. To Kishiar, who raised an eyebrow as if surprised, Yuder replied with an even colder truth of an event that had never occurred.

“No, the king pieces we lost were not just one.”

The king pieces, called Imum, came in pairs. Just as the imperial laws declared that the Emperor and Empress should govern with equal authority and titles, so too did the Imum. Though they were called king and queen depending on the pattern, there was no actual difference between the two pieces.

Losing one might make the game difficult, but there would still be a chance to turn it around. Losing both, however, meant irrevocable defeat.

And Kishiar would surely know this as well.

Yuder felt a heavy surge of strength in the arm that Kishiar had wrapped around him. The depths of Kishiar's reddened eyes seemed immeasurably dark and sad. Without a word, he turned the edge of the board.

Several white pieces fell in front of Yuder's pieces on the board. However, Yuder's pieces were not entirely intact either. Multiple black pieces had fallen off the board. Only after that did Kishiar finally speak again.

"Why stay here to begin anew, rather than starting a new game elsewhere? Is there something special that can only be achieved here?"

"No, I didn't necessarily think it had to restart here."

"So you mean to say that you came back to this board just before joining the Cavalry?"

"Yes."

"Every being seeks comfort in familiar surroundings. Is the Cavalry that place for you?"

"It could be."

"In that case, your previous self must have been"

Kishiar's hand slowly groped the board and picked up a piece. It was a general piece with red markings on white.

The general piece, known as 'Makas,' came in three different colors, each with its own unique ability. The red Makas that Kishiar had picked up was reputed to be the highest-ranking among the general pieces.

A noble person who could stand closest to the king's piece.

However, the general pieces also had the ability to switch places with pieces of equal or higher rank, often sacrificing themselves in place of a king in peril.

Kishiar stared at the red Makas for a moment before placing it in a new position. The piece landed with a thud, as if it would die at any moment in its precarious position.

Yuder understood what Kishiar left unsaid, what the red general piece meant. And through Yuder's silence, Kishiar must have found an answer as well.

""

"What more do you want, aside from not suffering the same defeat twice?"

"Nothing."

"Are you not interested in revenge against the one who defeated you?"

Kishiar's fingers hovered over the edge of the board, as if about to turn it. Yuder noticed the piece at the tip of Kishiar's fingernail was the king's piece. A strange feeling overwhelmed him, as if Kishiar would snatch that piece at any moment if he agreed.

'Revenge.'

He had entertained the thought while sorting out his mind, unable to sleep in the inn after his first death and resurrection. He knew all sorts of secret passages and mission routes; it wouldn't be impossible to storm into the palace and kill everyone, including Crown Prince Katchian, and then die in satisfaction.

If he survived that, he had even fantasized about escaping to some distant island in the far North and living out the rest of his life

there.

But all those thoughts ended up as fleeting fantasies. The reason was simple.

“I don’t think that could ever be a game. I’ve been given the opportunity to fulfill my true mission. Ruining that before it even starts would be no different from running away. So, it means nothing to me.”

Yuder had a goal. He wanted to save Kishiar, rebuild the Cavalry, and protect the world this time.

If he could accomplish that, then nothing else mattered.

After that thought, Yuder had forgotten all the boiling emptiness that had left him lost.

Kishiar took some time, lost in thought, before speaking again. When he finally did, the question carried an emotion similar to before, yet somehow different.

“At the end of victory, what you gain is more important than mere revenge, isn’t it?”

“Yes.”

Kishiar had said something similar before. He was not one to deal with his enemies out of petty emotions; instead, he made his moves with an eye toward the distant future of the country and people he sought to protect.

It was unlikely that he would miss the underlying intent in Yuder’s words.

A long, quivering breath tinged with suppressed pain escaped from between Kishiar’s lips. He pulled Yuder into a deep embrace,

resting his forehead on Yuder's shoulder.

"…If I taught you this game, I could have taught you anything else as well. No one knows the meaning of that as much as I do. And yet, while you were losing in the game, the fact that I did nothing…"

"… "

"I too was already absent there, wasn't I?"

Yuder closed his eyes.

"Yes."

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Chapter 572

It was a dreadful truth, one that couldn’t be fully conveyed with a mere word or two. A mix of conflicting urgesto either swallow it whole or to spit it outtickled at Yuder’s throat.

Images from a distant past jumbled and sped past behind his closed eyes. Though he was in contact with Kishiar and shouldn’t have felt cold, his fingertips turned icy. As Yuder exhaled thinly, as though drenched by the chill, the strong arms supporting his back pulled him closer.

The force was so strong, it was as if the being within those arms would vanish if not held tightly enough.

Breathing became slightly laborious, but Yuder found that preferable. Through this constraining sensation, he could feel assured that both Kishiar and he were alive.

The resounding heartbeat from the chest against his ear clearly conveyed that this was not a dream or an illusion of a decapitated convict.

So, Yuder found the strength to open his eyes again.

“…”

The pieces on the board of their tactical game remained unmoved, silently holding their places. It was Yuder’s turn to move.

If no move was made, the game would never end.

But wasn’t that why he had started the game in the first place?

To continue the conversation, the next move was necessary. Slowly, he reached out and grabbed a black piece.

“To be honest, I think I deserved to lose before. Not because you were absent, but because it was my game,” Yuder said.

Kishiar’s eyes shifted to the piece gripped in Yuder’s hand.

“I didn’t even understand the rules properly, and I made many mistakes and wrong moves because I didn’t trust the pieces I had. I’m still seeking answers for some of the things I’ve done. This includes matters related to you.”

Even if Kishiar were to ask about his absence, Yuder had little to offer by way of satisfying explanation.

“But I can tell you this: a finished game is just thata finished game. A wrongly placed piece can’t be taken back, but I’ve learned that you just need not repeat the same mistake in the future. So… I don’t plan to forget that what I have to do is no different,” Yuder concluded.

As his words ended, the knight piece in Yuder’s hand audibly and forcefully advanced on the board.

Speaking had somehow loosened the knot within him. He felt a sense of relief, as if he had finally understood why Kanna had once said that revealing hidden secrets could be liberating.

Instead of instructing the next move, Yuder looked up and met Kishiar’s eyes. The man had been watching him with a furrowed brow and an indescribable expression, and now he let out a long sigh.

“Yes, you’re right,” Kishiar agreed.

With that, he raised his other hand and spun the board half a turn. The pieces on the rotating board seemed to brush against Kishiar's fingertips as they moved.

"One can't resume a game that has already ended. Anyone can make a mistake with their pieces. What matters is what you do after. In that regard if the person who taught you this game heard what you said, he might've shed tears of emotion," Kishiar mused.

His expression was both playful and bitter, speaking those words while knowing that he himself couldn't remember his past self.

Kishiar, with his head bowed, gently pressed his lips to the corner of Yuder's eyes. His lips soon grazed Yuder's cheek and ear, tenderly drawing in the lower lip, and then ventured deeper. Within this prolonged kiss, a sensation emerged, as if the tightly held lock of their hearts was slowly being released.

Yuder felt the silent agony emanating from Kishiar, and the myriad emotions directed solely at him. Such intense emotions poured out all at once, leaving Yuder feeling almost intoxicated.

It was a connection of emotions that Yuder hadn't felt since Kishiar had dreamt of his death.

Several times, Yuder felt breathless and dizzy, but he didn't push Kishiar away. Instead, he embraced the sensations conveyed by Kishiar's lips. Even after they parted, the afterglow lingered for a long while.

Through their locked gazes, Kishiar naturally understood the emotions Yuder couldn't express with words.

It was always a wonder how the body could convey so much more than words.

“We should make the next move,” Kishiar, resting his forehead against Yuder’s, said after a long contemplation of the board. He then delicately picked up the red-patterned general piece, Makas, which seemed to be precariously surrounded. Its intended place was originally the safe spot reserved for the king piece.

When Kishiar swapped the positions of the two pieces, the now vulnerable piece became the king, or Imum.

It was a significant change.

Yuder silently moved his piece again. Amidst the flickering light of the burning stone furnace, several moves were exchanged. After swapping the king and general pieces, Kishiar wielded the king piece as if it were a knight, dominating the board. Despite the many restrictions on the king piece, in Kishiar’s hands, it appeared as a born leader guiding all pieces.

The king piece wasn’t just meant to hold its position until the end of the war. With a meticulous strategy, the white Imum dominated the board anew.

It was a style of play Yuder had never seen in their countless tactical games from their past lives. Within Kishiar’s innovative use of the king piece, the red general piece acted as if it were a third Imum, fulfilling its role.

Yuder realized for the first time that a single move of the Imum could so vividly change the small world on the hexagonal board.

Yuder’s black pieces bravely charged, but they struggled against Kishiar’s white pieces, which adeptly attacked and retreated. Yet, even though he was losing, Yuder didn’t feel bad at all.

Finally, Kishiar’s advancing white Imum gracefully defeated the opponent and took its place. The victory was undoubtedly his.

Leaving the dominant piece on the board, Kishiar finally spoke, “Now, what do you think I’m going to ask?”

“I always thought you’d ask how I managed to return here,” Yuder replied.

“If you knew the answer, wouldn’t you have shown less interest in the ancient records related to time?” Kishiar speculated that Yuder didn’t know the reason for his return to the past.

“Was I wrong?”

“No, you’re right.”

“What I want to ask is something entirely different. But it’s also the most important.”

Yuder nodded firmly in agreement.

“Understood. If you’re asking about the former Commander, then”

“Hm? No, that’s not it.”

The man let out a soft chuckle before suppressing it.

“Didn’t I say there are still many unanswered questions about me from the previous game? It’s not that important, so there’s no need to discuss it now. I’ll talk about it when everything becomes clear.”

Yuder doubted his own ears for a moment before cautiously asking, “Why wouldn’t that be important?”

“There’s something I want to say in advance, since you seem overly concerned. How I disappeared in the previous game doesn’t particularly intrigue me.”

“Shouldn’t you still be aware of it?”

“Well, as far as I can see, the ‘me’ from back then was neither a good beginning nor a good ending for you. Knowing more about that time is unlikely to change this view.”

Kishiar, responding indifferently, lifted the corners of his lips in a smile.

“That is”

It was a sharp inference, as if he had seen their relationship from a previous life in its entirety. Faced with the many displays he had seen up to this point, Yuder eventually closed his mouth and struggled to find his words.

“It’s different now.”

“Good. That’s the only thing I can be happy about right now. I can’t express how grateful I am that you put it so kindly.”

Kishiar once again pressed his lips against Yuder’s forehead.

“What I most want to know right now are the conditions you believe are necessary to win in this ‘new game,’ and your ultimate goal.”

””

“You haven’t told me your larger objective, even though you’ve abandoned revenge to pursue it so fervently. Saving me, preserving the Emperor, and solidifying the Cavalryall feel like steps toward a greater goal. So, will you clearly tell me?”

It was only then that Yuder realized he had never articulated his greatest ambition: to save the world.

He had never felt the need to say it out loud, as he was deeply rooted in the belief that no one would trust him.

He stared blankly at the man before him for a long time. Even when faced with those trusting red eyes, the words were not easy to release.

Would he believe him?

Would he not?

Finally, a voice, strained from years of torment, flowed forth.

“My aim, my goal is”

””

“To prevent and avert all the impending disasters that will befall our world.”

With just a single sentence, the long age of distrust came to an end.

And then Kishiar smiled at Yuder with an expression he had never anticipated.

“I was going to say that even if your goal was world domination, I’d still support you. Guess I got it half right.”

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Chapter 573

“I was going to say that even if your goal was world domination, I’d still support you. Guess I got it half right.”

Only half right? The only commonality between saving the world and conquering it was that both concerned the world they lived in. It was a wildly audacious joke, but the individual it pertained to remained unfazed. Kishiar was as he always wasneither laughing at Yuder’s words, nor particularly scrutinizing them.

After repeatedly observing Kishiar’s demeanor, Yuder finally spoke, hesitating as if he couldn’t find the right words.

“Do you not find what I said absurdly ambitious?”

“Why would I think that?”

Kishiar counter-questioned.

“If you’re only saying that because it was me who said it”

“While it’s true I’m prepared to believe whatever you say, that doesn’t mean I don’t have any basis for it,” Kishiar replied decisively.

“If claiming an unseen goal is absurd, then wouldn’t priests, who believe and follow an unseen God, be absurd in their very existence?”

“Isn’t that different from this?”

“Depending on your perspective, not really. The existence of divine power as evidence of God has been a long-standing debate among mages. The logic was that the existence of magic power

doesn’t necessarily mean you should believe in magic. Priests weren’t fond of the topic, to say the least.”

Wasn’t it more than just a topic priests weren’t fond of? Wasn’t it a taboo subject that could brand you as insane?

As Yuder pondered his response, Kishiar overlaid his hand atop Yuder’s clenched fist. Slowly caressing the back of Yuder’s hand, Kishiar continued.

“Wanting to prevent an impending calamity is different from vaguely clamoring for world peace or salvation. If the Yuder I know had the latter kind of aim, I imagine he would be in a temple, not with the Cavalry. Perhaps wearing priestly robes that would make someone like me uncomfortable.”

Each soft-spoken word from Kishiar struck deeply into Yuder’s ears and resonated in his mind.

“But you chose the Cavalry, not the temple. That signifies that you deemed your abilities as an Awakener more essential for your aims than prayers. Considering what you’ve been doing all this time, everything appears to be rooted in practical efforts, far removed from absurdity, don’t you think?”

His long fingers wove between Yuder’s, enumerating each of his past deeds.

“You’ve taught others to increase their chances of survival, without fear of envy or jealousy. You’ve faced dangers head-on, nipping problems in the bud, even saving lives destined for death. To anyone observing, this is closer to the attitude of a military leader preparing for war, rather than its opposite.”

”””

“Self-proclaimed prophets and madmen who cry that the end is near have always existed. However, those who only talk never provide evidence or prepare for anything. That’s the difference between you and them. That alone is reason enough for me to believe in you.”

No one.

No one had ever given Yuder such an answer before.

Quietly blinking, a whirlwind of memories from his past life swept through Yuder’s mind.

‘Yudrain, are you in your right mind? If you’re going to spout nonsense, leave and go do what you were instructed to do.’

True. The disasters have worsened over the years. Last year’s earthquakes and droughts were followed by a harsh winter. But to say these events and the appearance of monsters are omens of impending doom is laughable. Are we saying that it’s the end of the world, like in the time of the First Emperor a thousand years ago?

Commander of the Cavalry, you wander the lands these days seeking to be a hero, don’t you? Isn’t what you’ve achieved so far enough? If you’re that bored, get a wife. Ah, is it because your body is some sort of Omega that you can’t?

Even if what you say is true, it’s difficult to officially acknowledge. The King of Nelarn can only protect Nelarn; we can’t afford to stretch our hands towards the Empire.

Well, Commander, I’m not so sure. Weren’t the results from the last investigation of the cracks inconclusive? No unusual elements were found. Perhaps you’re overthinking this because the last event was too taxing?

Doubt. Scorn. Mockery. Concern.

None of these reactions that Yuder had grown accustomed to were present here.

Standing before eyes that seemed to genuinely listen, Yuder felt as though the burden he'd been carrying for so long had lightened for the first time.

He bowed his head and took a deep breath.

"You truly believe what I'm saying."

"Yes, I do."

""

"Then speak. What do you mean when you say a disaster is coming, and what needs to be done?"

Yuder bit his lip lightly and looked up. Then he finally spoke the thoughts he had kept to himself for so long since his return from death.

"You've likely seen the strange cracks that appeared when monsters began to emerge unusually in the West. Do you remember?"

"Of course. I ordered an investigation into whether similar cracks have appeared since, but no news has come so far."

"I've seen similar things before."

"Is that what you're trying to address?"

The conversation with someone who seemed to understand him completely flowed without any hitches.

Yuder nodded slightly.

“Yes, but in my opinion, that’s only the beginning.”

“What comes after the beginning?”

“Listing them all would be pointless; there will be numerous disasters.”

Earthquakes, droughts, harsh winters, torrential rains, famine, plagues, war, and people who bewilder others like sages, as well as those who look out only for themselves. Yuder listed them all and added one more point.

“Soon, priests and mages will lose their power, while the Awakeners will increase exponentially.”

It was one of the pivotal issues during the chaotic times of his previous life.

The number of Awakeners grew, while the ranks of mages, priests, and knights dwindled. Mages who could hardly cast any spells, priests struggling to heal even minor injuries, and knights who couldn’t even produce auras were fiercely fighting to protect their privileges, shunning the emerging Awakeners among them.

As a result of these power struggles, many established groups lost their vitality. Even the collapse of what seemed like an eternal Pearl Tower happened as an extension of this struggle.

All existing powers, including magic and divine forces, were like faint candles compared to the power of the newly emerged Awakeners. Yet the people holding the power were these older groups. Among the Awakeners, who gained strength overnight but failed to unite or gain respect, disorder and chaos erupted.

Any norms for systematically solving disasters were lost. With everyone scrambling to address immediate issues, no one sought to investigate the root causes.

“I thought it might be a sign that this board no, the world is falling apart. So, I conducted an investigation of my own,” Yuder recalled.

The memory that led Yuder to this conclusion dated back to the time when the Pearl Tower was collapsing. At that time, he had been closely investigating the traces of cracks that frequently appeared at the disaster scene.

Mages, who had shown no reaction to Yuder’s requests for assistance, were conducting their own research under the premise that, “Perhaps the situation a thousand years ago was similar to what we face now.”

Although the research was fundamentally aimed at restoring the mages’ power and authority, and was not of any practical help, Yuder found their findings to be somewhat worthy of consideration once he obtained the information.

What piqued his interest specifically was the notion that the circumstances of the world nearly a thousand years ago, when it had almost perished, might be similar to the disasters happening now.

He began to travel the world to investigate matters related to this. He met experts from various countries to seek their advice and rushed to the scenes of unusual disasters to gather information.

However, people did not view his efforts as purely altruistic. Opinions abounded that the Cavalry Commander who ignored even the Emperor’s orders to go around doing his own thing was harboring dangerous intentions.

Some mages and knights from other countries he met to convey his ideas also first suspected that there might be a hidden political motive behind Yuder’s actions. If not, the mockery followed that he must be mad.

“It’s easier on the conscience to proceed secretly when nobody believes me anyway,” Yuder reasoned, ultimately making the dangerous decision to investigate the world’s state on his own.

“In the end, I never got a chance to properly verify whether my thoughts were correct, but I’m not displeased with how things have turned out.”

Since he had been executed, there was no way to know what had happened to the world afterward. All he resolved was not to repeat the same mistakes in this life.

“The things I need to accomplish my goal remain the same as before. If the Commander and His Majesty the Emperor maintain their health, and the Cavalry continues to hold its center, then that will be sufficient.”

“…”

“Those are all the words I wish to offer.”

Kishiar remained silent for a long time. Only when warmth returned to Yuder’s hand, which he held, did he finally open his mouth.

“What should we do now?”

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Chapter 574

“What should we do?”

What did he mean by ‘what should we do’? Kishiar’s lips briefly curled into a smile devoid of warmth as he silently gazed at Yuder, contemplating the ambiguous statement. Kishiar leaned his head against Yuder’s shoulder as he let out a breath, as if exhaling unspeakable burdens.

“Really, what should we do”

The utterance, devoid of a clear subject, felt like a sigh of parched sorrow or perhaps an exclamation of fervent regret. There seemed to be room for myriad interpretations, making it difficult to discern what he actually intended to convey.

But one thing was clear.

Even after hearing the story, Kishiar wanted to deeply connect with Yuder.

That was enough to quash any doubt. Yuder didn’t say another word and simply let his body relax into Kishiar’s embrace. Despite having only played a few tactical games, his muscles screamed as if he had completed an exceedingly difficult task.

“If I think of anything more about what lies ahead, I will discuss it with you later. I may not know much, but I remember most things related to disasters.”

Instead of responding, Kishiar gently breathed onto Yuder’s nape.

After a brief silence, Yuder impulsively spoke, noticing the trembling of Kishiar’s fingers near his knee.

“Do you know that Kanna has been avoiding me lately?”

“A bit. But it didnt seem to be a big problem, so I left it alone.”

Kishiar, ever inscrutable, hinted that he had guessed as much.

“Yes. I only recently found out why. The moment our gloves touched, she apparently gleaned information that led her to speculate about my relationship with you. She seemed to be struggling to keep this a secret, but after sharing it, she felt relieved and pleased.”

Kishiar would probably guess why Yuder had brought this up. Still, Yuder slowly articulated his thoughts.

“I think I feel the same way now.”

“Keeping secrets is difficult and painful.”

“Ive never felt that way before. I neither desire to confide in others nor find it difficult or painful.”

Whether the story deserved secrecy or not, it was all the same to Yuder. He had often been criticized for appearing emotionless. He never felt the need to share his inner thoughts, nor was he curious about others’ secrets.

The Emperor Katchian, who admired this trait in Yuder, had heard that even when Yuder was tortured, he remained silent and revealed nothing. This belatedly sent a chill down the Emperor’s spine.

Only Kishiar was an exception. The common sense that information is more beneficial when kept to oneself lost its meaning in front of him. The weight of a secret felt heavier to Yuder than any shackles he had ever worn.

Deceiving himself was perhaps better than deceiving Kishiar.

“How honorable. So, am I the only one who knows what you’ve just shared?”

Yuder closed and reopened his eyes in response to Kishiar’s question.

“You are the only one who knows this much though Enon does know a bit.”

Yuder wondered if this might cause disappointment, but Kishiar’s voice remained serene.

“How much does he know?”

“He knows that I’m involved in a new game, and that I aim for different outcomes than before.”

“Is he, perhaps, one of the outcomes you wanted to change?”

It had grown rather pointless to react to Kishiar’s insights.

“Yes.”

“I recall what you said after the Western mission was over. You mentioned that we shouldn’t be too hard on ourselves for our performance, suggesting that we might have prevented greater chaos.”

Hearing Kishiar’s words, Yuder also remembered the conversation they’d had at that time.

“I think it’s time to return those words to you.”

Yuder turned his head to meet Kishiar’s gaze. Deep-set red eyes, filled with complex emotions, softly swirled as they held Yuder.

“Both His Majesty and I, and everyone else for that matter, owe you a great deal. It would be absurd if the person in question didn’t

realize this.”

“A debt, you say?”

“A very big one.”

Despite his disagreement, Kishiar wouldn’t hear of it. Just as Yuder was about to speak further, Kishiar skillfully interrupted him by suggesting they rest for the day in his chambers, pointing to the darkening sky outside the window.

Yuder would have refused in the past, but tonight he wanted to make sure that Kishiar got a proper night’s sleep.

They even played a tactical game, but you can never be sure of the outcome without seeing it. Knowing all too well how skilled Kishiar was at acting perfectly fine, Yuder felt it imperative to verify this for himself.

Kishiar no longer took headache medicine. Without a word, he kissed Yuder several times and, without a single gap, drew him close, resting their heads together. Near Kishiar’s bed hung a sachet of fragrant herbs, similar to one in Yuder’s rooma gift from the Empress.

Amid the subtle aroma, fighting back exhaustion and sleep, Kishiar whispered with a smile, already aware of Yuder’s struggle to stay awake.

“Sweet dreams.”

And then, a whispered, “Thank you.”

It was so faint that Yuder couldn’t be certain he’d heard it correctly. But not wanting to wake the man whose eyes were already closed, Yuder simply blinked quietly in his embrace.

Lying side by side, Yuder realized this might be the first time he fell asleep after Kishiar. While awake, he hadn't noticed, but with eyes closed, he saw Kishiar's cheeks were paler than usual. Even the tiredness, induced by sleep deprivation, made him appear differently beautiful. Yuder found he couldn't be entranced by that beauty as he had been before.

The same man who had been surprisingly composed, even when confronted with unbelievable tales of time travel and his own death, appeared so fragile now, all because of a dream in which Yuder died. This realization brought both wonder and a pang of sorrow.

Looking at his peacefully resting face, Yuder thought of his past life's self, who had not been curious about him. Knowing the truth of his death, perhaps this man before him would be as nonchalant about it today. The thought crossed his mind for the first time.

So maybe, just maybe, Yuder felt that he shouldn't be the only one to feel that way.

'…Perhaps I'm the one who should be grateful, the one who is truly in debt.'

For a long time, Yuder watched Kishiar sleep in the darkness. Doing nothing more than watching him wasn't boring or uncomfortable. This moment felt like the most peaceful part of his day.

What should he do now? Yuder quietly repeated to himself the words Kishiar had once murmured.

What should he do now?

The love he first became aware of and named didn't seem like a stranger upon reflection, but rather like one of the familiar sensations that had always gripped his heart and never let go.

Beneath the dim moonlight streaming through a round window at the highest point of the bedroom, Kishiar opened his eyes.

He gazed at Yuder, who lay beside him, breathing evenly. A wistful smile appeared on his face. He wanted to kiss Yuder's smooth forehead, revealing his character even in sleep, but refrained, knowing that Yuder would wake up due to his heightened senses. Instead, he pressed his own lips to his fingertip and lightly touched it to Yuder's hair before rising.

Stepping quietly, he left the bedroom and walked down the chilly corridor into his study. The fire in the hearth seemed weaker than before, perhaps due to the many spent magic stones. He added another handful, and the flames roared to life in brilliant colors, illuminating the neglected game board and chairs.

Kishiar took a seat and quietly examined the board he had set up.

White pieces led by a white king had won the round, still standing triumphant against the black pieces.

He stared at the setup as if committing it to memory before starting to return the pieces to their original positions. Soon, the board was restored, looking ready for another game.

Even after resetting the board, Kishiar didn't stop. He began moving the black pieces, then placing them back on the board one by one.

Black piece. Next, a white piece. Then another black piece.

The pieces found their places without hesitation, following the exact sequence of their first game with Yuder.

Usually, he would replay the game in his mind, but sometimes, when he wanted to relive the emotions perfectly, he would play it out

alone like this. Kishiar felt that now was one of those times.

Click,

Click,

Click

As the soft sounds of the pieces touching the board echoed in a steady rhythm, Kishiar’s thoughts drifted to Yuder’s pale face that he had once gazed upon.

He recalled every moment: the scarred hands placing the pieces without hesitation, the moments of truth confessed in a voice as cold but burning like dark ashes.

-Click

What he had heard today was not everything. He was certain of that.

Yuder had told him that there was more to be said, yet he didn’t realize how vacant his own expression was when he said it.

And he probably didn’t know what emotions that had stirred in the observer.

Kishiar replayed their numerous games over and over. The intricate maneuvers Yuder had made, the swapping of general and king pieces that Kishiar had executed, all flowed seamlessly until they suddenly stopped. Despite his intention to keep them on track, the pieces began to stray from their predetermined lines and boundaries.

Why had the pieces crossed the lines even when he thought he had played them correctly?

Kishiar stared down at the hexagonal board with a blank expression. For a moment, everything blurred, and the straight lines twisted. Then suddenly, everything became clear again.

At that moment, a transparent droplet fell onto the board, leaving its mark.

Kishiar stopped, holding a piece in his hand.

It seemed that he couldn’t continue the replay anymore.

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Chapter 575

“Did you sleep well?”

The next morning, when Yuder woke up, the Kishiar he met was shining like never before. Perhaps it was the perfect weather, but his face radiated with sunlight, making it almost difficult to believe it was real.

As Yuder stared blankly at him, Kishiar, who was seated in a picture-perfect posture, tilted his head and asked, “Why are you looking at me like that?”

“It seems you slept extremely well,” Yuder remarked.

“Of course, I slept well. Thanks to someone,” Kishiar said, a glow emanating from his face that made it impossible to doubt his words.

The tactical game they played yesterday had evidently worked wonders. Yuder felt a tingling sensation deep in his chest as he went to the bathroom to wash up. When he emerged, taking a bit longer than usual, Kishiar was busily writing something at the table.

“You’re working before breakfast?” Yuder inquired.

“As soon as I woke up, thoughts of the tasks ahead poured into my mind like a waterfall. I couldn’t resist. I haven’t felt like this since I first awakened,” Kishiar responded.

Yuder couldn’t see the contents of the paper that Kishiar was zealously writing. Sensing Yuder’s gaze, Kishiar offered a sly smile.

“Would you like to know what I’m planning to do today?”

There was no reason to refuse. Yuder nodded silently and approached Kishiar, who extended his arm, pulling Yuder to sit naturally on his lap. When Yuder made no move to resist or stand up, Kishiar lightly kissed his still-damp cheek and lips.

“After I finish these letters, we’ll have breakfast while sending the couriers. Then I’ll call Nathan to request the return of some documents and brief him on upcoming tasks. I’ll meet with the legal scholars, the nobles, and the administrators. After that, we’ll visit Lady Justin, the manager at the Shuden Trading Company in the capital, to collect items I’ve previously ordered. For dinner, we’ll have a cozy, family-only gathering at the palace.”

The words ‘family-only’ and ‘cozy’ struck Yuder. From Kishiar’s expression, he sensed that this ‘family’ likely involved more than just the Emperor and Empress.

‘Is he planning to call Crown Prince Katchian?’

Whether the Crown Prince would come was uncertain, but Kishiar seemed not to consider refusal a possibility.

“You’ll need more than a day,” Yuder remarked.

“Not just me, my assistant will be overwhelmed too. But it’s already exciting,” Kishiar said, finishing his writing and signing the document. Throughout their conversation, his quill had been moving at an impressive speed.

“Done. Would you like to read it before I send it off?”

“If you don’t mind, I would,” Yuder agreed.

“Nothing here that an assistant can’t see,” said Kishiar.

Yuder picked up one of the completed letters. It was addressed to the Emperor. Since it wasn’t encrypted, there was no need to

decipher it. He read through it quickly.

After offering earnest words for the Emperor's health and well-being, Kishiar got straight to the point for which he had sent the letter.

"Your Majesty, I would like to discuss a method that could make the newfound light you've acquired easier to manage. I am certain you will be pleased to hear it… Furthermore, I would like to accept the caring concern you've previously suggested, and hope to dine with you tonight at the First Palace of Sun Palace. Someone from Dawn Palace will contact Your Majesty."

The "newfound light" the Emperor had acquired was undoubtedly the Awakened ability. What could make it easier to manage was probably…

"I see why you want to bring me back to the palace," said Yuder.

It was clear that Kishiar intended to recommend Yuder as an assistant to train Emperor Keilusa in his new abilities.

"Originally, I planned on giving you more time to rest, but as of yesterday, I've concluded there's no need to delay. One reason is that His Majesty desperately needs rapid progress in his abilities. Will that be alright?"

"Had you not offered, I was going to ask for it anyway."

"Why would I do that when you're in charge of all the Cavalry training programs and are the most knowledgeable about awakened abilities?"

The rest of the letter was mostly easy to interpret.

Dinner at the First Palace of Sun Palace traditionally required all the family members of the Emperor to be present. As Kishiar had

subtly implied earlier, it seemed he was intent on definitively assessing Katchian's stance in a private setting tonight.

'In a world where Emperor Keilusa, the Empress, and even he himself didn't exist, it's clear who would have been the Emperor. It's just a natural progression.'

Until now, Kishiar hadn't shown much interest in Crown Prince Katchian. The change in attitude was evidence that yesterday's conversation had significantly impacted him.

He believed Yuder's story.

Realizing this through the sudden dinner invitation gave Yuder mixed feelings. Suppressing a tingling sensation somewhere in his heart, Yuder spoke.

"This part here what is this 'caring concern' that you previously suggested?"

"Ah, that's nothing much. His Majesty offered to take over the duties I've been handling in the capital since he felt rejuvenated and eager. He suggested that I focus on what I want to do."

"And what is it that you want to do?"

"Cavalry matters. I told him back then that it wasn't necessary… but given that the second Cavalry recruitment and branch establishment announcement will be moved up to tomorrow, I thought I'd just accept His Majesty's consideration like an impulsive younger brother."

"I'm sorry, did you say tomorrow?"

For a moment, Yuder thought he had misheard. But Kishiar's smiling face remained unchanged.

“Yes, tomorrow.”

“And it appears that, contrary to initial plans, I may personally take action for establishing the branches.”

Originally, the establishment of Cavalry branches and recruitment were to be done by sending qualified members from their respective regions.

Yuder had observed Kishiar preparing for this in the midst of party planning. Selecting suitable members and preparing for deployment were straightforward, but the current hurdle was the local aristocrats, who would host the new branches.

The feudal lords generally represented indigenous powers that had protected their lands for a long time. In some ways, they wielded authority even greater than the Emperor himself. It was unlikely that they would willingly accept a Cavalry branch stationed in their front yard. The establishment of a branch was tantamount to reasserting the Emperor’s authority throughout the land.

Deploying commoners to establish a branch would be slower and more difficult than if Kishiar, an imperial family member, took it upon himself to do so.

But that couldnt be all he was after.

Yuder recalled the third tactical game Kishiar had last played yesterday. It was a new strategy, unlike anything he had ever used in his past life. And thus, a victory was crafted.

A new path found through new information.

Yuder thought that perhaps the direction Kishiar intended to take from now on might be slightly different from before. But what did it matter? In the end

“I will follow the path you choose.”

Yuder’s future path would also be the same.

A little earlier, in the barren desert of the south.

Men with reddish skin from the southern lands stared off into the distance with cold faces.

“This is definitely where Nahan disappeared and reappeared.”

Onakwei, a wounded southern merchant who had accompanied Nahan to the south, surveyed the surroundings with deeply set eyes. They had discreetly followed Nahan from a distance after dropping him off and were taken aback when he disappeared near the desert.

After several days of surveillance, they discovered traces of Nahan’s reappearance. However, by then, he had already left the desert with his other comrades. Onakwei and his companions wanted to continue chasing after the man they considered an unsettling beast, but as it was not a direct order, they reluctantly held back. Instead, they thoroughly investigated where Nahan had gone and from where he had reappeared.

What they discovered was a force that distorted the surroundings near the beginning of the desert.

“Swin, with his keen eyes, confirmed it. A fairly large area near here has this ‘power’ spread out. It seems to have the ability to remain hidden, unnoticeable to those not granted permission.”

“It must be a stronghold.”

“Yes, what we were looking for.”

Being Awakeners themselves, it didn’t take them long to speculate what lay within that power once they recognized its

existence. But identifying its existence and finding the actual entrance were two different matters. They spent several more days and finally managed to break through into the stronghold.

“Intruders have broken in!”

“Is it the Cavalry?”

“No, its southerners!”

The Awakeners, whose peaceful daily life was invaded, cried out in alarm. Children and the sick hastily retreated to hidden shelters, while those trained for such invasions quickly surrounded the southern men.

A woman who seemed to be their leader stepped forward, brandishing a sharply honed farming tool.

“From the look of you, youre no ordinary lost travelers. Who are you? Depending on your answer, you may not leave here peacefully.”

The blade of what should have been a simple farming tool ominously wavered. She was a person with the ability to control metal.

The southern merchants were not greatly perturbed even in this threatening situation. After confirming that the place was a village, they raised their hands in a sign of no harm intended. The one who stepped forward was Onakwei, who had received direct orders from their superior ‘Aton’ to locate this place.

“We are Awakeners like you. We reached this point through a fellow named Nahan.”

Even though Onakwei had no intention of ever meeting Nahan again, he calmly lied. Upon hearing his words, the Awakeners of the

Star of Nagran speculated that the southern Awakeners must have heard from Nahan how to make contact with them.

“Nahan… is not here right now.”

Realizing that they were all Awakeners, both parties relaxed their aggressive stances, cautiously eyeing each other.

“How did you get to know Nahan?”

“I can’t go into details, but let’s just say we’ve helped each other. We didn’t intend to intrude so abruptly; we had no choice but to enter when we couldn’t find another way. My apologies.”

At this, the Awakeners of the Star of Nagran finally let their guard down a bit. Although the newcomers were unfamiliar, their demeanor wasn’t hostile, so there was no indication of an attack. In any case, they were a collective of various Awakeners who had trickled in from all over, so they quickly regained their composure in this situation.

“Fine. They just happened to wander in because of Nahan. Let’s get back to work.”

Watching them disperse, their varied abilities dissipating, Onakwei quietly opened his mouth.

“We’ve roamed the Empire quite a lot, but this is the first time we’ve learned of a group like yours. If there’s a leader, could we meet and talk?”

“Hmm… Well, come this way and let’s talk. The entrance to the village is narrow.”

A woman who had introduced herself as Sera led them into a small house. The long table set for the meeting was the only piece of furniture there. After seating Onakwei and his companions, Sera issued a stern warning.

“The chairs here are enchanted. Make a wrong move and you’ll be instantly bound. Losing your memory and getting kicked out wouldn’t be an issue, so it’s best to converse politely.”

“Intriguing.”

“Isn’t it? Places like this exist only here. All thanks to the sage.”

“The sage is your leader then? We thought Nahan played a similar role.”

Given that the southern merchants they had met in the west had only encountered Nahan and a few Awakeners who followed him, this was a reasonable assumption. Naturally, the Awakeners following the sage took offense to the conjecture.

“Who said that? Was it Nahan?”

“So it wasn’t?”

“No. Our leader is the sage. A humble and gentle guide who has nurtured this place. He’s nothing like Nahan!”

Voices erupted in excitement, each person interjecting with their own comments. The atmosphere didn’t seem tense, as if they were freely expressing their grievances like they would to any new Awakeners in their village. Anyone with a political sense could easily deduce quite a bit about the Star of Nagran just from that exchange.

Onakwei exchanged glances with his companions. They all quickly surmised that this conversation could be very useful for them.

‘Intriguing. To think there’s such a large group of Awakeners tucked away in the furthest corners of the Empire, so active that they even have factions.’

Aton, who had sent him here, had guessed right; besides Nahan, there would surely be other Awakeners, possibly even those who could communicate with them.

‘This is certainly an opportunity.’

Nahan was too clear and dangerous in his desires to collaborate with, but this sage seemed to be on a somewhat different path. If they could use this group, everything would become a lot simpler.

After listening intently to the Awakeners from the Star of Nagran for some time, Onakwei smiled.

“I’m quite intrigued to meet this sage of yours after hearing about him. Where is he now?”

“Why do you ask?”

“There’s much more I’d like to know about this place.”

“We don’t even know who you are, aside from the fact that you’re Awakeners, or where you’ve come from. How can we trust you?”

Despite her skepticism, Sera ultimately agreed to send word about their desire to meet the sage. She said she would pen a message to convey their request.

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Chapter 576

On the day a new letter arrived at the sage’s residence in the capital, informing that Awakeners from an unknown southern land had arrived at the southern base, the residence was conspicuously empty. Normally, one of the Awakeners staying at the Crown Prince’s palace would have stepped out briefly to retrieve the correspondence, but they were all extremely busy trying to locate Nahan, who may also have arrived in the capital.

In the meantime, the residence where they stayed stood vacant, except for the presence of some unfamiliar intruders standing confidently at its entrance.

“Are we really going in like this? Without covering our faces?”

“Of course! Why cover our faces in broad daylight? Want to look suspicious and get reported?”

“Finn, Gakane is new to this kind of infiltration. Let’s be understanding.”

“But still”

Gakane Bolunwald, Hinn Eldore, and Finn Eldore.

The three of them, dressed in casual attire with their faces fully exposed, looked up at the house where the Star of Nagran had been staying. The average-looking mansion, located in the Fifth Wall District of the capital where the middle-class commoners mainly resided, appeared utterly peaceful.

The people passing by were calm, the distant cries of merchants were leisurely, and the weather was superb. It was hardly the time to break into someone’s house.

‘People are just walking around Are we really going in under these circumstances? Is this okay?’

Gakane Bolunwald looked around nervously, his face full of concern. Yuder had granted him permission to inspect the house, which was fine, but he had never imagined they’d be doing so at this time on this day.

However, the Eldore siblings brushed off his worries as unfounded concerns and merely grinned like relaxed little beasts.

“Don’t worry, Gakane. There’s no chance we’ll get caught. We’ve been watching this place for days and no one’s come by. And the people walking around couldn’t care less about us. They’ll probably just think we’re guests visiting this house briefly.”

“Right. And we won’t stay long. If those guys return, you’ll know immediately through the shadows you’ve placed on the walls and gates. Just use your ability to escape.”

“You’re the one who knows best how much our teleportation abilities have improved. Still nervous?”

Gakane looked down at the bright-eyed siblings and sighed deeply.

“My concern isn’t whether you two can pull this off. It’s that the world is full of unforeseen circumstances, and it’s good to never forget that.”

The siblings locked eyes. The sentiment that they were trusted in skill but that unexpected things might happen lifted their spirits instantly.

“Ah ha Hehe, exactly.”

“Well, being cautious is one of Gakane’s strong points, anyway.”

“What’s my strong point?”

“Alright, Gakane. We’ll transport you in, so open the door!”

Seizing Gakane’s arms, the siblings activated their teleportation abilities.

“Wait! What if someone walks by”

Before Gakane could finish his sentence, he vanished over the wall. As the siblings chuckled, it didn’t take long for the main gate to open from the inside. Gakane, a hint of red in his cheeks, gestured for them to come in.

“Come in.”

No one paid any attention to the sudden disappearance and the subsequent opening of the inner door. Thus, the trio confidently entered the residence where the Star of Nagran had been staying.

“See? No one’s suspicious, right?”

“Ah Yes, that seems to be the case.”

“Hm? But Gakane, what’s that in your hand? A letter?”

Finn noticed the unfamiliar object in Gakane’s hand and asked.

As soon as he stepped inside the wall, he found it at his feet. It seemed like someone had thrown it in there.

The letter had neither the receiver’s name nor the sender’s. However, it was clear that the occupants of this house were the intended recipients.

“Gakane, open it. What does it say?”

“Uh… give me a moment.”

Gakane quickly read the contents of the letter. A moment later, his eyes narrowed.

“It’s a letter from a place called ‘Southern Base.’ It discusses recent events there and mentions ‘a sage’ whom some unfamiliar visitors wish to meet. And also…”

Gakane’s expression became grave as he read the bottom of the letter. He stopped speaking and began reading intently. The Eldore siblings shouted in unison.

“And what?”

“Tell us quickly, we’re curious!”

“Ah, sorry. As I was reading, it occurred to me that the new visitors at the base might be people we know.”

“Who? Who are they?”

“You remember the southern merchants who supposedly escaped with Nahan from the West? They haven’t been caught yet.”

“Wow. Could it be?”

“I’m pretty sure it’s them.”

“My goodness! What a treasure of a letter!”

“Quickly, put it away! No one will know it’s missing since there’s no one to claim it!”

The Eldore siblings’ eyes gleamed with excitement. This time, Gakane did not oppose their suggestion.

They began exploring the interior of the house in earnest. Unlike Gakane, who moved cautiously, the siblings scurried about like a pair of squirrels, turning over every room.

Though the occupants of the house had left few personal belongings, the search was not entirely fruitless. Wherever people had lived, some trace that hinted at the owner's identity would inevitably remain.

"Look at this, Finn! A shopping list for essentials! It even names who should buy what!"

"I found an unfinished letter amid the trash. It might be valuable to Kanna."

"Hmph, unbeatable."

"Gakane, didn't you find anything useful?"

Beaming with the thrill of discovery, Finn asked.

"Ah, well… this."

With a somewhat sheepish look, Gakane held up a twisted leather cord.

"Huh? Isn't that just a piece of string?"

"True, but… men from prestigious noble families often tie something like this around their sleeves or shirts."

"A noble's string?"

"If you look closely, you'll see the family crest embossed all over the thin leather. It also serves as proof of identity. But the problem is… I think I've seen this crest at the imperial palace party."

"Really? So a noble who could attend such a party has been here?!"

"Could it be an associate of Duke Diarca who lent this house to the Awakeners?"

“That’s likely, but it’s odd that they would leave this behind. Gifting this cord implies deep trust; it’s like saying you can use my name wherever you go. It doesn’t make sense for the secretive Duke Diarca to do that.”

“Ah, you have a point.”

“It might not be the family crest I remember from the party. Still, it’s worth checking, so I’m going to snip off a piece.”

“Wow… Gakane!”

The siblings were deeply impressed by Gakane’s unexpected resourcefulness.

“I knew it would be good to have you along! Now, have we finished going through everything? Should we check for hidden spaces?”

“I agree!”

“Hold on.”

“Don’t oppose this, Gakane. Treasure hunting is essential for infiltration!”

“That’s not the point! Something triggered the shadow I cast outside. We need to go now…!”

Just as he spoke, a noise like a breaking door resounded from the exterior. It wasn’t the sound of someone unlocking and entering in the usual manner.

‘…A third intruder?’

The three looked at each other and reflexively darted toward the stairs leading to the basement. Gakane’s shadow clone altered its

form to conceal them in the darkness, just as voices were heard from above.

“We were told they’d be sending a letter of contact here. Why is no one around? Another hoax?”

“It can’t be. This is the place”

“Nahan. What should we do?”

‘…Nahan?’

The eyes of the three Cavalry members sharpened at once. If they hadn’t misheard, the third intruder was Nahanaffiliated with the Star of Nagran, and elusive since fleeing from the west.

As Hinn clenched and unclenched his fist, contemplating whether to rush outside, Gakane shook his head frantically to dissuade him.

‘Not now! There are three of us and many of them!’

‘So what? We can win!’

‘Have you forgotten that Nahan escaped from Yuder and our Commander multiple times? He’s a real threat!’

“Let’s search the room. Something will give them away.”

Then, a very soft and slow voice resonated. Despite being an ordinary conversation, something in that voice compelled the listeners to focus.

“Ah, yes, of course. It’s Nahan, after all. Let’s search!”

The sound of hurried footsteps echoed as people began to scurry about. Gakane spread his shadow clone even wider to hide their forms. A few times, footsteps approached close to their hiding spot,

ramping up the tension, but fortunately, no one ventured all the way down.

They found what they were looking for somewhere in the rooms they searched.

“I’ve found it! This is definitely Nezo’s stuff.”

“I’ve also found something that looks like Ella’s hair.”

“Exactly. There’s no doubt, the sage was here.”

Nahan whispered.

“Then he hasn’t completely left this place. We should wait a few days.”

Nahan quietly thanked those who had found evidence confirming the sage’s presence. The Awakeners couldn’t hide their joy.

“Let’s go!”

As the Awakeners filed out, having accomplished their mission, Gakane breathed a sigh of relief. But then, a chilling voice was heard from above.

“What’s that over there?”

“I thought I saw stairs leading to the basement.”

“A basement.”

“They wouldn’t need a basement for a temporary dwelling, so I didn’t check. But should we look now?”

The Eldore siblings clenched their fists, showing signs of transformation. But luckily, the presence hovering above them neither descended nor moved.

“Nahan! The guards are coming!”

“…”

“We need to get out of here!”

“Nahan.”

One of Nahan’s companions called his name in confusion. After a moment of silence, Nahan turned and began to walk away.

After they had all left and the door closed, the Cavalry members used their abilities to swiftly escape through the back door they had scouted earlier.

“Phew, what was that all about? Nahan barging in like that?”

“Why is someone who was chased from the west so brazen? I wouldn’t have believed it if I hadn’t heard it myself.”

“Let’s head back immediately and report.”

The three of them looked at each other and nodded. Their steps back to the Cavalry headquarters were quicker and more urgent than ever before.

“It’s an honor to have you visit the Black Pigeon, Duke Peletta.”

Yuder glanced at the administrator as he and Nathan Zuckerman bowed their heads in greeting. The administrator looked as if he hadn’t slept in about a week.

Behind them, many people were scurrying around, clutching scrolls or hefty bundles of papers. Indecipherable shouts filled the air from all directions. This was the heart of the Empire’s administrative machinerythe Black Pigeon, occupying the most extensive land area in Second Wall.

“His Excellency regrets that he cannot come down to greet you in person and asks for your understanding.”

“If he is still in a meeting, then it can’t be helped. I naturally understand. So… will I be meeting the scholars first?”

“Yes, please follow me.”

As the administrator turned to lead the way, Nathan Zuckerman gave Kishiar a discreet bow.

“I shall return. I am going to return some books.”

“Alright. We’ll meet back here when you’re done.”

Nathan Zuckerman had come with them to return some rare books that could only be borrowed from the imperial library. Kishiar and Yuder were to head to the upper floors of the Black Pigeon, so it was time to part ways.

Yuder returned the bow that Nathan Zuckerman gave him as well. The loyal adjutant had noticed that his lord seemed to be in better health that morning, and for some reason, his manners seemed unusually formal today.

‘He wasn’t disrespectful before, but something feels different…’

It was hard to put into words, but something was definitely off. Yuder abandoned the search for the right term and followed Kishiar. As they ascended several flights of stairs, Yuder’s mind was filled with thoughts about the people they were about to meet.

‘Legal scholars and ministers.’

These were people far removed from Yuder’s previous life. Especially the ministerstheir roles had diminished in influence as the aristocracy’s power had grown.

In this era, a minister was essentially someone who oversaw all the Empire's administrators and handled the nitty-gritty of daily governance. A thankless job with a heap of responsibilities but little to show for it.

The legal scholars were also situated in the Black Pigeon, interpreting, amending, and introducing new laws every day. Yet, like the ministers, they had little presence for the amount of work they did.

'Kishiar had consulted with them before to draft and modify regulations within the Cavalry concerning second gender.'

What was Kishiar planning to do with them this time?

The tall man walking ahead of Yuder seemed to notice his gaze and turned his head slightly. When he offered a fleeting smile, Yuder found it difficult to continue his train of thought.

"…Here we are."

They had arrived at a quiet area, devoid of passerby.

"Well done."

Kishiar lightly commended the guide before opening a closed door and walking in.

"Duke Peletta has arrived!"

Scholars who were gathered around a pile of papers discussing something immediately turned their attention toward Kishiar.

Yuder watched as they all bowed their heads toward Kishiar in unison. Most of them were older, exuded a stubborn air, and showed little reaction to Kishiar's presence.

"Have you arrived, Your Highness?"

“It’s been a while, Marchio.”

Kishiar directed a warm smile toward Marchio, an Elderly scholar who appeared especially solemn among his peers. It was a smile that could disarm anyone, yet Marchio only twitched his nose, offering no smile in return.

“When I received word that you would be coming today, I thought it must be a mistake. But it turns out it’s true.”

“You wound me by saying that. I thought I’ve always been consistent in my actions.”

“And why are you here this time? To add another rule to the Cavalry?”

“That’s part of it, yes. But this time, I’ve come to ask about the legislative process related to imperial laws.”

“You do understand that adding a new law isn’t a simple matter, correct?”

“Of course. That’s why I’ve sought you out, isn’t it?”

Marchio sighed deeply.

“Last time, you made us scramble to find precedent for completely new clauses, tormenting us in the process. What law are you aiming to create this time?”

“Oh, let’s not create misunderstandings, my dear advisor. This time it’s really quite simple. I just want to formalize some existing regulations within the Cavalry and incorporate them into imperial law.”

Marchio paused for a moment.

“I apologize, but it seems my hearing has deteriorated with age. Would you mind repeating that?”

“Very well. I intend to take a few regulations from the Cavalry, and seamlessly integrate them into imperial law. …Can you hear me now?”

Kishiar flashed a shameless and sly smile.

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Chapter 577

It wasn't just the legal scholars, including Marchio, who doubted Kishiar's words. Even Yuder, who had somewhat anticipated what Kishiar might do when meeting the scholars, was taken aback by his unexpectedly bold statements.

'He intends to create laws concerning Awakeners so quickly? Is that even possible?'

In his previous life, new rules or laws were only incrementally added when Yuder and his Cavalry returned from accomplishing a task, or when an incident related to Awakeners occurred. In other words, it was extremely difficult to change imperial law unless something significant happened.

Sure, regulations concerning the Cavalry could easily be amended. However, the weight of imperial law was entirely different. Yuder had heard that while it was easy to add exceptions to existing clauses, creating entirely new ones was incredibly challenging.

'Of course, I had planned to discuss legislation at some point… just not now.'

Yet Kishiar was not someone who would recklessly plunge into the impossible. If he believed it could be done now, then perhaps it was better to do it sooner rather than later.

'Yes… the issue might simply be that we have fewer Cavalry members and our influence is somewhat weak right now. Both will be resolved soon, and the Emperor is back in good health to back us up.'

While being weak posed its own set of challenges, growing too powerful would also attract various forms of containment. Their

current, moderate status might actually be the ideal time to act.

‘But that’s my perspective… the real question is whether those legal scholars will help.’

The scholars appeared stunned by Kishiar’s audacious proposal. Seeing Marchio’s trembling eyes, Yuder took a step forward, ready to intervene should Marchio charge at Kishiar.

However, Marchio remained calm. The stern-faced scholar wiped his face a few times and then asked a single question.

“So… exactly what kind of law do you wish to implement, Your Highness?”

Kishiar smiled, as if he had been waiting for that question.

“Excellent. Here is the draft of the target legislation I’ve diligently prepared, along with a list of Cavalry regulations to support it.”

‘When did he even prepare this?’

Yuder narrowed his eyes, unaware that Kishiar had brought such documents while they dined and traveled here. Marchio, who had begun reading the paper, also frowned considerably.

“The focus appears to be on laws related to the treatment of Awakeners.”

“We have sufficient case examples from the activities of the Cavalry, which makes drafting this new legislation feasible. All you scholars need to do is compile the justifications and help with the submission.”

“Compiling justifications is easier said than done… Provisions related to the heat period of second gender Awakeners, marital arrangements, and child rearing and inheritance could face

significant opposition. You are aware, of course, that even after submission to the council, there will be countless hurdles before the new laws can be finalized. The temples and the Mage Guild also have to review and approve.”

Upon hearing the issues Marchio pointed out, the other legal scholars began to murmur amongst themselves, all wearing serious expressions.

“I know. Don’t worry, I won’t leave all of this in your hands. This is something we’re starting with adequate preparation.”

“Phew…”

Marchio wiped his face again. As he glanced around at the other scholars, their eyes met, as if they were reading each other’s thoughts. It was as though they each possessed some uncanny ability to do so.

After a considerable pause, they all seemed to come to a decision, bowing their heads in unison.

“Since you’ve all appeared to have made up your minds, what more can this old man say? Just know that this will be a difficult battle.”

“Isn’t every battle related to the law a difficult one, Marchio? Remember your own words?”

“Those were the words I spoke to the young prince who came here, frustrated by the abundance of ‘do nots’ and wanting to change things.”

Marchio’s words carried weight, but not like a thorny sharpness. Despite knowing the comment was directed at him, Kishiar’s expression remained unchanged. He smiled.

“When Emperor Aklan, the Second Emperor, reformed the laws concerning mages, he also faced significant opposition. But he accomplished it, and that law is now permanently embedded in the Empire, accepted by everyone as a matter of course. If precedent matters, then we’re already halfway there, don’t you think? This is a battle worth fighting.”

“Things are different now.”

“Still, the situation itself is quite similarcreating new legal categories for people who didn’t exist under previous laws.”

””

“Awakeners already exist, and their numbers will only grow, not shrink. Right now, young people moving towards the future, children yet to be born, could become new Awakeners. As the Commander of the Cavalry and an Awakener serving His Imperial Majesty, I believe it’s unjust to let them live in the Empire without even the smallest fence of law to guide them.”

The smallest fence of lawa phrase Yuder had never heard before. But somehow, it struck a chord in him.

Marchio too, seemed to soften his stern expression for the first time, lowering his furrowed brows. An unusually long sigh escaped his lips.

“You’re as compelling as ever. Whether it was when you asked for help in setting up regulations for the Cavalry or now, it’s impossible for old men like us to refuse you. Alright, you have my support.”

“Thank you. You’re the ones I trust the most.”

Marchio received the thanks half-heartedly and soon disappeared, as if eager to put distance between himself and Kishiar.

Yet Yuder’s perception of him had changed slightly from their first meeting. The legal scholars here worked on thankless tasks with fatigued faces, but before the work they needed to do, they never revealed any trivial emotions.

It was no ordinary feat to maintain their composure when confronted with the prospect of creating new laws related to the second gender Awakeners.

‘I remember he said he’s been helping with regulations since the Cavalry was first established.’

Yuder felt he understood why Kishiar chose to address this issue first.

“Legal scholars rarely give a definite opinion on anything. They said it would be difficult, but they didn’t say it would be impossible. Don’t worry. They’re all people who love legal texts more than anyone else. I’d bet they’re now quite excited to dig up old laws and precedents.”

Kishiar spoke, perhaps mistaking the reason Yuder continued to gaze in the direction Marchio had disappeared.

“I wasn’t worried.”

“Is that so?”

“Although it may seem rushed, I’m beginning to think that now might actually be the right time.”

“That’s good to hear.”

“By the way, when did you find the time to write all of that? Didn’t you say you slept well last night?”

Creating the legislative plan wasn't particularly difficult; I had been contemplating it in my head for some time. Knowing what to write made the rest simply a matter of speed."

It didn't sound like a lie. Given the circumstances, it was entirely possible.

But what is this? This subtle feeling.

Yuder gazed intently at Kishiar. In response, Kishiar squinted his eyes, seemingly pleased by the attention, but the feeling dissipated as quickly as it had come.

"…"

"Marchio has been here since the days of the previous Emperor. He's a reliable scholar in jurisprudence. Probably the only scholars you can trust not to toy with legal interpretation are him and the scholars here."

"That's why I came here," he said. Yuder recalled an impactful statement he'd heard earlier.

"You said, 'The law is the smallest fence.'"

"Ah, yes. That's a quote from Eloto, a famous scholar in jurisprudence whom Marchio admires. I cited it on purpose."

Kishiar grinned, pleased with himself.

"Indeed. I've never thought of the law that way, so I found it quite insightful."

"Law can't determine everything. But a house with even the minimum fencing is different from one without. Of course, how well you maintain and protect that fence also matters."

A fair point. A house with a well-planned fence from the start was certainly different from one where boards were hastily hammered in only after an accident occurred.

Yuder found this fact extremely satisfying.

“I apologize for my late arrival, Your Grace.”

—

Hebreyina Reiflang, the current high minister in the Orr Empire, appeared with a face twice as weary as any scholar’s. After exchanging greetings, she immediately downed a cup of black coffee that her aides had brought, exhaling as if she’d barely escaped death.

The first thing she said was an expression of heartfelt gratitude and goodwill towards Yuder.

“It’s an honor to meet the famous Baron Aile here. I regret not being able to thank you at the last party due to unforeseen circumstances. Did you happen to receive my gift?”

Since returning to the capital, the invitations and gifts that had poured into Yuder had mostly been screened by Kishiar. Still, he had shoved most of the gifts that passed muster into a drawer without another glance. It seemed the high minister’s gift was among them.

But I can’t tell her that.

“Yes, thank you.”

“Your contributions in the west have significantly reduced the workload for our administrators. Had that monster invaded a town or city, the consequences would have been unimaginable. Please find the gift useful; it was sent with sincere gratitude.”

Yuder thought he should probably look for the high minister's gift as soon as he returned.

Fortunately, the high minister did not dwell on the subject of gifts and got straight to the point.

"I received your letter this morning, requesting assistance in selecting locations for branches across the Empire."

"That's right."

"If you could specify the areas, I'll notify the local administrators in advance. I can't guarantee everyone will offer the help you desire, but"

"That's more than enough."

"Very well, then."

The conversation flowed, each participant carefully choosing their words, as they delved deeper into the intricate worlds of law and governance.

The high minister was a person of swift decisions. After spending a good while exchanging stories with Kishiar about the officials dispatched to the west for inspections, she casually brought up the topic of new laws, something Kishiar had earlier discussed with the legal scholars.

The high minister showed no particular reaction, but neither did she visibly oppose the idea. It was difficult for Yuder to discern what she was thinking as she listened to Kishiar's words.

'As for the current high minister, I really can't tell. In his previous life, she didn't last long after Emperor Katchian and we never had the chance to meet,' thought Yuder.

Although she hadn’t worked under Emperor Katchian for long, it was hard to assert that she was truly loyal to the current Emperor. The atmosphere between her and Kishiar was strictly professional, which only intensified that impression.

However, Kishiar stood up from his seat with a satisfied smile as if that were enough for him, signaling that their meeting had come to an end.

“I apologize for taking up your busy time.”

“Not at all.”

A cordial yet political smile exchanged between the two, marking the end of their meeting.

Yuder carefully asked as he followed Kishiar, who was climbing onto a carriage headed for their next destination.

“Will the high minister truly support this new law?”

Kishiar responded, “That’s not a bad response. She’s the one who has most keenly felt the need for a Cavalry due to recent events, so getting her support shouldn’t be difficult. However, it’s a bit unfortunate that she seems to have taken quite a liking to you in the process.”

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Chapter 578

Kishiar responded, “That’s not a bad response. She’s the one who has most keenly felt the need for a Cavalry due to recent events, so getting her support shouldn’t be difficult. However, it’s a bit unfortunate that she seems to have taken quite a liking to you in the process.”

If the high minister’s reaction was good, why did Kishiar express regret about her fondness for Yuder? Could there be complications if she ended up liking him?

‘I assumed her fondness for me was nothing more than gratitude for lightening her workload. Nothing more, nothing less.’

As Yuder pondered whether there was something he had overlooked, Kishiar, wearing a semi-serious expression, playfully filled him in.

“I really worry sometimes. If one more person advises you to change jobs because you, my assistant are too charming, what will happen? The high minister already has an unusual popularity among younger men and women.”

“Is that so?”

“Yes, it is. There’s even a legendary tale from her youth that says every debutante in the capital’s social scene confessed to her.”

Yuder briefly recalled the high minister’s demeanor. While he couldn’t pinpoint what exactly made her especially popular among the younger crowd, she certainly had a calm and composed aura that was hard to find in her peers. But that was it.

What Yuder found most peculiar about the high minister was something else.

‘She never showed any surprise or negative reaction while having formal conversations with Kishiar, despite seemingly not having been close to him previously.’

To those unfamiliar with Kishiar, he was usually considered a frivolous man of little intellect. Hence, even a slight departure from that perception would be startling. Many believed that Kishiar was merely parroting Emperor Keilusa.

This was the case with nobles he’d met in the West, and even some young-looking legal scholars they’d encountered earlier displayed signs of discomfort around him.

Unlike them, the high minister remained unfazed. She had initially observed Kishiar for a brief moment but continued the conversation serenely thereafter. Whether it was because she fully understood Kishiar’s forthright and insightful nature, or her ability to suppress her astonishment was exceptional, either way, it was quite impressive.

‘Not that I expect her to actually suggest that I switch jobs.’

Yuder verbalized his final thoughts succinctly.

“Whether the high minister is popular or not, it’s none of my concern. I’m grateful that you consider me so valuable, but you’re worrying too much.”

The crux of the matter was his last statement, yet all Kishiar seemed to hear was, “I’m grateful that you consider me so valuable.”

“Who could be more valuable than an assistant like you? If countless nobles and even the prince of Nelarn and the Emperor heard about this, they would be flabbergasted. To think you

undervalue yourself so. Whose fault could that be? Is it mine, as your Commander?”

His voice carried an exaggerated sorrow. It might have been half in jest, but Yuder was momentarily lost for words. Finally, he articulated the response that came to him a beat too late.

“Regardless, I have no intention of leaving the Cavalry. You know this now, don’t you?”

He assumed that by now, Yuder would understand the weight of the word ‘now.’

The words of the man who had seemed to be jesting a moment earlier abruptly stopped.

“Commander?”

“Yes, that’s right.”

Just then, a breeze that snuck in through a slightly opened window gently rustled the curtains. The sunlight, which had found its way in, beamed harshly onto Yuder’s face, which was directly facing the window. Yuder reflexively squinted, and his eyes caught the fleeting upward curve of the man’s lips.

“However, even knowing that, there have been times when I’ve wondered what would have happened if you had made a different choice, instead of the Cavalry. You would have surely excelled no matter where you were. You have that ability.”

“Commander.”

“Ah, of course, I have no complaints, as things are perfect for me now. It’s just a thought that crosses my mind sometimes.”

Strangely enough, despite wearing a cheerful smile, something about his expression seemed to lose its color.

“So, shall we head to the next location?”

The Shuden Trading Company building was located quite a distance from the center of Karl Lorwick Street, the hub of all trading houses. Although the building was small, it didn’t lack in opulence, befitting a place that specialized in rare and valuable items.

Yuder, accompanied by Kishiar, who was wearing a magic bracelet that rendered his face ordinary, entered the place confidently.

“WelcomeOh?”

The person who was greeting them widened his eyes as he saw Kishiar.

“My, what a rare pleasure. You have graced us with your presence after such a long time. But today, you’re accompanied by someone else?”

As was often the case for those meeting Yuder for the first time, the employee seemed a little uncomfortable around the man with jet-black and pallid features. Kishiar cheerfully pulled Yuder closer by the waist and leaned his head toward him.

“He’s with me because we are close enough to be together.”

“Ah…”

The employee’s attitude shifted instantly.

“Understood. Are you here to buy a gift for your cherished companion? We have some excellent new items in stock…”

“No. That can wait. Where is Lady Justin?”

“Looking for the Lady? She has been out since this morning for an appointment. Oh, could it be…?”

“I’m her appointment. Lead the way.”

“Ah, of course.”

The employee hurriedly escorted them upstairs. The door to the most lavish room opened, and a rich scent of perfume assailed their nostrils. A young lady, seated amidst a variety of exquisite items and inspecting jewelry, stood up to greet them.

“So, you’ve finally arrived.”

She seemed less like a trading house manager and more like a dazzling figure commanding the social scene. Her voice had a mesmerizing quality, as did her perfectly styled hair and meticulously manicured nails.

Though she was captivating enough to steal anyone’s gaze, Yuder wasn’t interested in her appearance. What caught his attention was the familiar scent filling the room.

‘It’s the same fragrance I often smelled when Kishiar came back from going out…’

Moreover, Yuder had encountered this scent before in this lifetime. It was after he had just joined the Cavalry and had scolded Kiolle and then he had visited Kishiar’s office and smelled it. [TL: Chapter 15-16]

The vague memory of feeling uneasy after smelling a perfume that was popular among the high-society ladies at the time flashed through his mind. Had Kishiar visited this place back then?

In an instant, Yuder’s gaze, now sharper than before, swept over his surroundings.

Sensing that gaze, Kishiar whispered with a smile.

“The Lady knows who I am. There’s no need to be so tense.”

“How much does she know about you?”

“Enough to comfortably call me ‘Commander’ here.”

Kishiar’s expression remained serene.

“Do you remember when we went to meet Prince Revlin? I had a fake identification from Shuden that allowed me to move freely around the capital. I’ve often obtained necessary items from here.”

“You also sometimes served as my servant, infiltrating parties directly.”

From the inner room, a lady emerged, carrying two boxes, one large and one small. She set them on the table, adding to the conversation.

“It was both tedious and thrilling. I’ve heard so much about you, Baron Aile. It’s a great pleasure to finally meet you in person.”

“Did you already know who I am?”

“Of course. Company Leader Mick has talked a lot about you. I heard that Madam Hellem took quite a liking to you, and seeing you now, it’s understandable.”

“Justin, what about the items?”

Kishiar cut her off with a laugh. Lady Justin also responded with a smile.

“Everything you’ve requested is prepared. You can take them after checking.”

The lady sat down and opened the first of the two boxes on the table, opting for the smaller one. Inside was an object resembling a palm-sized mirror. Its surface was discolored in places and showed signs of aging, including some cracks.

“A Mirror of Truth. A genuine artifact.”

Kishiar picked it up and examined it from all angles. The moment magic energy flowed into his hand, Yuder felt as if something tightened around the depths of his eyes.

Though no golden light flowed from his eyes, Yuder blinked as he perceived an aura undulating around the artifact in Kishiar’s hand.

‘…Is that magic?’

Even without an explanation, it was evident. The diminutive, weathered artifact was brimming with far more magic energy than he’d anticipated.

“Yes, it’s authentic. Well done.”

After a thorough examination, Kishiar placed the artifact back into its box. Yuder thought the next box would contain a similar magic tool, but he was greeted with something entirely unexpected.

“This is the sword sheath you ordered. It’s enchanted with Radamantium to withstand an Eucalractium blade, and it’s been finely crafted with the highest-grade potions on leather. I’ve also added some extra gems to go with those you sent me earlier.”

Lady Justin presented a long, black sword sheath with a smile.

“It may not look all that extravagant, but I doubt there’s a more expensive sheath in this age. Is it exactly as you wanted?”

Indeed, her words rang true. At first glance, the black-painted sheath didn't appear particularly grand. However, a closer look revealed a deep-red gem near the closure, a sight Yuder found oddly familiar. Thin lines of gold and tiny gems around it shimmered with restrained elegance.

That deep-red gem was originally embedded in Kishiar's new sword sheath, which had later come into Yuder's possession. It had been a fixture in the groove of Yuder's previous sheath until it shattered in a battle against a massive monster in the west. It was now back in its rightful place.

'…I thought he simply reclaimed the sheath after recovering it from that battle.'

Yuder stared at the new sheath in silence, recalling the sword that lay dormant in its temporary sheath. The man inspecting the sheath turned his head toward him, smiling.

Their eyes met.

"Well, this is the new sheath. I placed the order when we were in the West, but getting the materials took longer than expected. Do you like it?"

'Do I like it?'

It was not a question of whether he 'liked' it.

It was, quite literally, the best.

Yuder took the sheath from Kishiar with an emotion he found hard to describe. Despite being sturdier than the one he had used previously, it was surprisingly lighter.

"I like it."

“Seeing you finally happy about somethingafter all the gems and clothes failed to make you smilealso pleases me.”

“I was worried I had made something wrong,” Lady Justin said, looking somewhat relieved in the face of Yuder’s normally emotionless countenance.

“This sheath won’t break as easily as the last when you wield your sword.”

Kishiar’s soothing voice resonated in his ears as he looked at the sheath in Yuder’s hand.

“Of course, preventing such a situation in the first place is ideal.”

“Yes.”

Yuder read the scars the West had left in his eyes and clenched the sheath tightly. A warmth spread through his hand.

“Thank you.”

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Chapter 579

As they were leaving the Shuden Trading Company, Yuder finally posed a question to Kishiar that he had been unable to ask earlier.

“What exactly is the ‘Mirror of Truth’?”

“It sounds grandiose, but it’s not much. It’s a magic artifact that can uncover something hidden in the subject it reflects.”

Kishiar explained that it was a sort of downgraded tool of an older ‘Seeking’ magic that ancient Archmages once used. Nowadays, it was so difficult to even create such an artifact that he had to search for an old one, a process that apparently hadn’t been smooth. This was one reason he had sought assistance from the Shuden Trading Company.

“It’s not universally applicable. It’s most effective when you need to find out something unique about an object that has a magic enchantment.”

Surprisingly, Kishiar didn’t seem too pleased to have obtained the Mirror of Truth. When asked why, he simply smiled and answered succinctly.

“I was quite desperate to find it at the time, but now it has become useless.”

An object that was once desperately needed but now had no value to Kishiar. There was only one explanation that fit.

“Did you acquire this for the Emperor?”

“Correct. You do catch on quickly. Initially, it was intended to be used on a relic sent by Prince Ejain.”

Yuder recalled the relic that Kishiar had recently received. He had not seen its actual form yet, but he already knew a few details about it from Prince Ejain.

‘The object of a blind sage, presumed to be the Archmage Luma by the Nelarn. If it’s a mage’s object, chances are it’s close to a magic artifact.’

It wasn’t uncommon to acquire one magic artifact to use another. Many ancient artifacts had lost their instructions or known effects.

“And the relic we received from the Nelarn Prince is called ‘Dream’s Voice.’ According to records, someone who used it once was fully healed from injuries, regaining their prior physical state.”

However, the person who had used the relic didn’t know how they had been able to use it. Despite many efforts to study it among the Nelarn, the mystery remained.

‘Now I see why Prince Ejain was willing to send it despite objections. A relic that can’t be immediately used is less important than overcoming the current crisis.’

Yuder also felt he understood why Emperor Keilusa and Kishiar were so keen to demand that specific relic. Kishiar would certainly see enough value in the records alone to merit further research.

“So, I got this Mirror of Truth to examine that relic. Although it’s not greatly needed now, I suppose we will use it when the time comes.”

As they conversed, their carriage smoothly crossed into the imperial palace grounds. Looking out the window at the rooftops and walls of various palaces, Yuder thought about the imperial family dinner he would attend later that day.

Today, he would be attending that gathering under the guise of accompanying Kishiar along with Nathan Zuckerman. Only the Emperor and his family could sit at the table in these official imperial family dinners held in the First Palace, but that didn't mean others couldn't attend.

Being allowed to accompany someone to this secretive and familial setting was considered a great honor for those close to the imperial family.

Yuder had been summoned to Emperor Katchian's dining table several times in his previous life, so he was well aware of the fact. However, the feelings he had then and now were quite different.

Kishiar, who had come to know of a future that might or might not happen, wondered how he would face the one who had once taken everything from him and the Emperor.

"By the way, I heard the Crown Prince replied that he would attend the meal and plans to be accompanied by Kiolle Diarca," Kishiar remarked.

At that moment, it seemed Kishiar had the same thought as Yuder. "Is that so? That's good news."

"Yes, it is. When you see him, make sure to ask about the healers who have been staying in the Crown Prince's palace for a long time."

Yuder had already planned to do so. He had been wondering when he would get the chance to meet, but now that he knew the Crown Prince was coming, there was no need to worry. As he thought about how to squeeze answers out of Kiolle, who might be feeling uneasy by now, Kishiar asked another question.

"What role did he play in the previous game?"

“Are you referring to Kiolle? He… could be considered a card that never came into play.”

“A card that never came into play…”

A card that couldn’t even participate in the game meant an early death. The man who repeated Yuder’s words seemed to understand the implication quite easily.

“Is that why you went out of your way to rescue him during the Eastern mission? Because he was an unforeseen variable?”

After learning of the future, when Kishiar heard Kiolle’s name, he seemed to think of Yuder’s past actions in that light.

While it was true that Yuder had gone out of his way to save Kiolle, he hadn’t really hoped for him to become a significant variable. After a moment of contemplation, Yuder spoke, “That’s one way to see it… but I didn’t have high expectations. The main reason I saved him back then was because I didn’t like the way Nahan spoke. Somehow, I ended up using Kiolle as an informant…”

Kiolle was indeed a strange variable. In his previous life, he might have died and disappeared, but now he was alive and well, serving as a knight for Katchian, something even Yuder hadn’t expected.

“Nahan’s words? Was there anything other than what was reported at the time?”

Yuder hadn’t spoken in detail about the events of that time. But now, there was nothing more to hide. “When Nahan tried to suppress me to kill Kiolle, I didn’t like the way he insisted he was always right and tried to command me.”

“He tried to command you?”

“Even if Kiolle was worthless, that cant be a good reason to follow the logic of someone like Nahan. There’s only one person who can command me. I had no reason to follow Nahan’s orders.”

The only person who could command Yuder looked at him.

“…Was that the real reason you came back injured?”

“…”

“Really…”

Yuder thought Kishiar would find it ridiculous. But when Kishiar looked at him with fiery eyes, Yuder realized he was mistaken.

Unexpectedly, without any questions or persuasion, Kishiar leaned in, grabbed Yuder’s chin, and kissed him. The sensation of a hot tongue filling his mouth made Yuder’s head spin. Slowly, Yuder wrapped his arms around Kishiar’s neck.

The carriage traveled in silence for a long time.

Naturally, even if it was an informal and secretive dinner gathering, any event held in the imperial palace required proper preparation and procedure.

Yuder stood alongside Nathan Zuckerman behind Kishiar, who was dressed in formal attire adorned with the coat of arms of Duke Peletta. Though not as extravagant as the outfits they’d wear to parties, their attire still clearly marked them as Kishiar’s people.

As they entered the designated dining area where the Emperor and his family were to have a comfortable meal, the chief attendant, now familiar to them, politely bowed.

“Welcome, Your Grace. Both His and Her Highnesses have already arrived; please proceed inside.”

“How unfortunate. I appear to be the latecomer despite having called for the meal.”

Kishiar chuckled as he walked in. Yuder, who was following him, only realized a moment later that the chief attendant was smiling softly in his direction.

‘Whats going on?’

“Baron Aile, I was worried as you were focusing on your recovery these past few days. I’m delighted to see you in good health.”

“Thank you for your concern.”

“Don’t mention it.”

Although it was an adequate exchange of pleasantries, the chief attendant’s sincere smile made Yuder uncomfortable. He followed Kishiar inside, unable to adapt to the chief attendant’s breezy, almost flirtatious demeanor.

But the unfamiliar winds didnt stop there.

“Welcome, Baron. If you hadn’t fully recovered, you could have rested. I hope you weren’t dragged here needlessly by the Duke.”

“The Duke told me you made good use of the sachet of herbs I gave you while you were resting. I’ve prepared more for you to take home tonight. I hope youll use it.”

“Yes, thank you.”

Though he didn’t look as healthy as an average person, the Emperors eyes were significantly more at ease than before, and the Empress, seemingly relieved from all her past sufferings, wore a flower-like expression as they continually spoke to Yuder.

Kishiar looked as though all the fuss around Yuder was as pleasant as a luring songbird, even Nathan Zuckerman, who normally would've been wearing a complex expression in such situations, seemed to take it all in stride. The atmosphere in the dining area was genuinely warm.

Ultimately, due to the Empress even going so far as to say, "Traditionally, companions may only join after the meal is done, but for Baron Aile, surely its alright," Yuder found himself wishing that Crown Prince Katchian would arrive sooner rather than later.

And right on cue, an announcement was made that Crown Prince Katchian had arrived.

"The Crown Prince has entered."

The chief attendant's emotionless voice accompanied the opening of the door, and the previously jovial atmosphere vanished as if it had never existed.

""

In the ensuing silence, Crown Prince Katchian moved to his seat with Kiolle following him. Yuder caught a fleeting glimpse of Kiolle, who twitched his shoulders and made a strange face as their eyes met. Evidently, Kiolle had not known Yuder would be present.

'Just pretend you dont know me and keep quiet.'

Upon receiving Yuder's stern look, Kiolle immediately flinched and took his position behind the Crown Prince.

"Greetings to His Majesty the Emperor and Her Majesty the Empress."

A sharp-eyed youth, appearing even younger than his years, extended his greeting with impeccable courtesy. The Empress

quietly spoke to him.

“You’re late, Crown Prince.”

“One of the newly arrived attendants failed to properly prepare the ceremonial attire. Despite rushing as much as possible, he inevitably ended up being late. It appears that there were mistakes due to the overly abrupt summons.”

While explaining the reason, there was no apology for the lateness. Moreover, there was an unspoken criticism towards the one who had hastily called him over. It was a condescending approach.

Yuder caught the glance of a young man covertly scanning the Emperor’s pallid cheeks and puffy eyes. He guessed why the boy was here.

‘He must have wanted the opportunity to closely observe and judge the Emperor’s condition, especially since the Emperor has only recently begun appearing at official banquets.’

The Emperor had yet to disclose his condition publicly. Aware of the Crown Prince’s intent to covertly gauge whether he was on the verge of death or not, the Emperor said nothing and quietly drank his water.

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Chapter 580

The evening dinner of the imperial family, who could never be described as congenial, appeared surprisingly peaceful at first glance.

Dishes masterfully crafted by the palace chefs, meticulously considering each person's health and preferences, lined the table. Because Yuder was inadvertently accompanying them, he had the chance to discern the culinary tastes of the imperial family members.

The Emperor, still not fully recovered, primarily consumed food that was gentle on the stomach and smooth. The Empress seemed to prefer dishes laden with flowers, mostly focusing on simple vegetables and fruits. Katchian picked at a few dishes as if he were a picky eater, although Yuder knew he didn't typically have such tendencies.

However, continuously consuming only specific dishes meant…

'Hes being cautious while pretending not to be.'

Kishiar was the complete opposite of Katchian. He had no qualms about eating anything and managed to consume all kinds of food gracefully. Some might say that he was so naive as to not even consider the possibility of poison, but from Yuder's perspective, it was the complete opposite.

Kishiar was clearly enjoying his meal more boldly than usual, aiming for somethingor someone.

And that someone was most likely Katchian.

'What kind of reaction is he trying to elicit by doing this?'

At the moment when Yuder was privately curious, Katchian was swallowing his extreme discomfort beneath a stoic facade.

“Your Majesty. This chicken dish is quite tender and tasty. Would you care to try some? I believe it would suit your palate.”

“Very well. If the Duke recommends it, then I shall try.”

“Your Majesty, Empress. Please consider adding this herb to the salad dressing you’re currently having. I once had it that way in the West, and it added a delightful layer of flavor.”

“Is that so? Im not familiar with Western cuisine, but if Duke Peletta recommends it, I can trust it.”

The invitation to the dinner at the Sun Palace had come from the Empress that very morning. At first, Katchian had been skeptical of the messages true intent, but he remembered that similar dinners had occurred when the Emperor was healthier and accepted the invitation.

‘There was originally a dinner planned during the Harvest Festival as well, though it was ultimately canceled.’

The reason for the cancellation had been the fool from the Apeto family, whom he had sent to the afterlife by way of poison. But that detail was irrelevant to Katchian. What mattered to him were the terrifying assassination attempts he had faced since then and the days of suffering that followed.

To determine whether the Emperor’s condition had improved or worsened, he had to take risks. And to survive in such a setting, he reluctantly had to put up Diarca as a shield.

Fortunately, Kiolle da Diarca, who was appointed as the Crown Prince’s watcher, was an absolute fool compared to Duke Diarca, making him very easy to manipulate. Knowing Kioles secret

weaknessthat he was secretly engaged in homosexual relationships without his parents knowledgeKatchian had chosen him as his companion without hesitation.

But the dynamics at the dinner table… they made it exceedingly difficult for him to obtain the information he sought.

“Cough, cough.”

“Your Majesty! Are you alright? Here’s some water”

“I am fine, my Empress. It was just an unfortunate coincidence that the chicken had the leek sauce that I do not particularly enjoy. Theres no need for concern.”

“Is that so?”

“Yes, indeed.”

“My apologies, Your Majesty. I had momentarily forgotten about that. However, leek sauce is good for your health, so please do not worry.”

Kishiar had been observing the Emperor as he ate his favorite chicken dish when, all of a sudden, the Emperor began to cough violently. The Empress looked visibly alarmed. She had thought the Emperor might be on his deathbed, but it turned out it was just a sauce that hadn’t agreed with him.

Wiping his mouth, Kishiar turned toward the now noticeably pale Emperor, his expression steeped in exaggerated concern. It was impossible for Katchian to tell whether Kishiar was genuinely worried or just putting on a show. Although the Emperor’s gaze hardened slightly, he refrained from scolding Kishiar and simply took another sip of water.

The Emperor called for the chief attendant in the midst of his meal and took a pill of some medicine. After that, he ate with a touch more enthusiasm than before.

Taking medicine implies poor health, but eating more than usual suggests the opposite. Just what condition was the Emperor in? Katchian felt as if everyone was either making fun of him or not; it seemed as though the symptoms he had managed to keep at bay were now breaking through.

Unease filled him. In the reflection of his cup, he thought he saw the ghastly red scar that marred his face once again. No matter how much he tried to convince himself that it wasn't real, how could he dismiss what he so vividly saw?

Katchians gaze pierced through the transparent glass. He felt as if he heard a voice from long ago, back when he was much younger.

"Blond hair and red eyes, undoubtedly. The colors may be a bit tainted, but your skin is pure. Keep it that way; it's the only weapon you'll have for survival"

The strongest evidence of his imperial bloodline was his hair and eyes, and skin as unblemished as untouched snow.

He couldn't afford to lose any of them… not even one…

As he nervously bit his lip, Katchian suddenly felt someone's gaze upon him. Behind the smiling Kishiar, he saw a man with black hair staring at him intently.

The moment their chillingly cold eyes met, the voices that had been swirling in his head vanished without a trace.

"Yuder. Yuder Aile… the Baron."

No emotion could be read from the man’s dark eyes. They were disturbing, as impenetrable as darkness, yet strangely captivating.

Katchian had never expected to encounter the man he had seen at the party again here. But on second thought, it made sense. The man was accompanying Duke Peletta, who had stirred up unprecedented events by dancing at the palace. Of course, the Duke wouldn’t leave out his confidant and advisor for such an occasion.

Katchian had heard the rumors that Yuder Aile was the confidant and right-hand man of Duke Peletta. At first, he found it laughable. But after seeing the man dance in the arms of Duke Peletta at the party, and then stand defiantly even in front of Duke Diarca, Katchian changed his mind completely.

Despite his humble background, the man acted as if receiving Duke Peletta’s attention was his birthright. Even Duke Diarca was humiliated in front of him, appearing no different from any other. It was truly odd.

Yuder Aile’s abilities were already proven by the massive monster head displayed in the Sun Palace. But was his unapologetic confidence also part of those abilities? Or did he possess something more that was hidden?

Katchian couldnt tell. And that uncertainty only deepened his interest in the man.

What if he could make him his own?

How would it feel to see a scene like today’s, but this time with Yuder Aile in his own grasp, being the one shaken and stirred?

Could he not overcome obstacles like the bothersome Duke Peletta and the suffocating Duke Diarca?

It was a thought that naturally came to mind

“Your Highness, Crown Prince.”

At that moment, Kishiar called out to Katchian. His voice carried a peculiar weight, making it impossible not to look at him. Simultaneously, their brief eye contact was averted, as if Kishiar had never been looking at Katchian in the first place.

“When will you answer the question I just asked?”

Kishiar asked with a smile. However, Katchian felt a little embarrassed because he couldnt remember what Kishiar had said. He looked back at Kiolle, who stood behind him, for some assistance, but Kiolle was of no help, simply offering a clueless expression as if he didnt know why he was being looked at.

To think that such a fool who can’t even offer a helpful word in situations like this is a knight escort.

Grinding his teeth, Katchian responded politely. After all, being distracted during a meal was a breach of etiquette.

“I apologize, but I didn’t hear you. What did you say?”

“It’s alright. In hindsight, it wasn’t such an important question. I anticipated that you might not find this gathering particularly pleasant, Your Highness. Perhaps my conversation has been rather dull.”

Could Duke Peletta really employ such a tacticskillfully lowering himself to attack his opponent?

A mix of suspicion and discomfort stirred within Katchian’s mind.

Even when others considered Duke Peletta to be inconsequential, he had never let his guard down. While Kishiar La Orr often seemed devoid of thoughts, Katchian knew that was hardly the sum of the man.

After becoming the Crown Prince, Katchian had heard stories about Emperor and Kishiar's past as a prince from the courtiers. Unlike the public's opinion that painted Kishiar as a wastrel, many long-standing courtiers held an absolute faith in the 'Second Prince who became a Duke.'

This odd faith held by people within the palace was something outsiders would never understand.

Having been groomed to become the new Emperor, Katchian had always felt a sense of crisis and defeat within the bonds of these courtiers. Was it because he had experienced such feelings too many times even before properly meeting Duke Peletta? Even after meeting Kishiar in person, Katchian frequently felt that Kishiar was not as thoughtless as he appeared to be.

No matter what Duke Diarca said about there being no need for caution, this intuition had never faded.

And today, that intuition was blossoming like a flower, emitting a bright red hue.

Was it wise to have attended this gathering today?

'Your Highness, do not worry. No one can penetrate your thoughts. Remember that your heart is fortified with innate strength. Stand confidently. Trust in me, and all that you seek will be within your grasp.'

At that moment, as if he had been waiting for it, a voice echoed in Katchian's mind.

It was the voice of the healer who had greatly aided Katchian in coming here. As he recalled that slow and polite voice, Katchian surprisingly quickly regained his composure. His mind eased, and the reason for his presence here became abundantly clear.

‘Yes, nothing can shake me.’

No situation had yet turned completely against him. Katchian decided to speak directly and ask.

“I…

“Your Majesty, if this pleases you, I will arrange to send more next time.”

“There’s no need for that.”

However, just then, Kishiar interjected, speaking to the Emperor, causing Katchian’s first attempt to be thwarted.

“I apologize, but”

“Ah, just as the Duke said earlier. It seems fine.”

Katchian raised his voice once more. However, this time it was the Empress who responded to Kishiar, causing him to be drowned out again. It was a frustrating moment.

‘Damn that Duke Peletta! Is this really unintentional?’

Annoyed, Katchian was about to raise his voice again when Kishiar turned his head.

“Crown Prince, did you have something you wanted to say?”

“…Yes.”

Katchian exhaled heavily, attempting to grasp the atmosphere that was not going in the direction he wanted.

“Actually, I was concerned when Her Majesty suddenly proposed a meal today. I wondered if there were urgent matters to be discussed in such a setting. Especially considering that both of you

had appeared together at several official occasions recently. If my concerns are unfounded, then that's good but…"

He almost expressed his slight annoyance, questioning why he was even invited if nothing was going to be said.

Though he was speaking diplomatically, he intended to keep probing for information about the Emperor's health. Emperor Keilusa was never an easy figure to deal with, but the comparatively tender-hearted Empress was easier to target. His plan was to try and get answers from her as easily as possible.

However, it wasn't the Empress sitting across from Katchian; it was Kishiar. The perfectly crafted sentences in his mind scattered the moment they met those red eyes.

Kishiar was smiling. But at the same time, an inexplicable, instinctual fear sounded an alarm in Katchians mind. It was a sensation that was both chilling and overwhelming, as if a weight was pressing down on him. For a moment, he hesitated and closed his mouth.

Then, he simultaneously felt both doubt and shame about his own hesitation.

"Why did you stop speaking?"

With a smiling face, Duke Peletta kindly asked Katchian.

"…"

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Chapter 581

On the surface, nothing seemed amiss. The conversations were all seemingly innocuous.

However, through Yuder’s watchful eyes, Kishiar’s manner of dealing with Katchian was glaringly apparent.

At the moment, Kishiar was treating Katchian in the same manner as Katchian usually treated others. Although it wasn’t an exact matchKishiar was considerably more moderatethe essence was strikingly similar.

The subtle and capricious way of piercing through people.

During Katchian’s reign as Emperor, everyone had been on edge, constantly wary of his unpredictable whims that determined who would be ousted and who would die. Yet, when filtered through Kishiar’s hands, all that remained of this terror was mere clownery.

At the end of the sharp blades that the nobles once wielded to earn others’ fears, there was really only such naivety.

Katchian probably wasn’t oblivious to what Kishiar was showing him. The young Crown Prince couldn’t hide his bewilderment and anxiety, as he realized that these people he’d regarded as simple and laughable were pushing him into unfamiliar territory. Despite attempts to mask it with a forced smile, his agitation was clear to those with keen eyes.

Still he’s managing to hold it together.

The moment their eyes met, Katchian seemed to visibly shrink, but soon gritted his teeth, regaining his posture. He then quickly excused himself, claiming that his unfinished sentence had merely

been an expression of concern for the Emperor and Empress, and that his current physical condition was the only reason for his abrupt stop.

Although one could sense palpable rage when he looked at Kishiar, his external response wasn't bad.

"Ah, I see. Your Highness hasn't been well recently either. Yet you've come all this way to show concern for both of them, reminding us once again how precious family is," Kishiar responded, also feigning understanding and moving on. 'Family being precious,' what an ironic term between Katchian and them.

"…Indeed. Health is more important than anything else," the Emperor picked up, shifting his gaze toward Katchian. His eyes conveyed a lot of unspoken messages.

Regardless, the meal continued. From the moment Katchian mentioned health, Kishiar changed his conversational strategy. He ceased to shake things up and started to let Katchian lead the discourse.

It was done in such a sophisticated manner that even Katchian himself probably hadn't fully caught on.

Questions, then answers. More questions, then more answers.

From the topic of health, which Katchian had himself introduced, the natural flow of questions and answers was subtly geared to extract longer answers from Katchian's side while divulging almost no information from the Emperors side. Katchian's guard was slightly tilted in a different direction, having already been rattled once.

Kishiar's skillful control of the conversation's pace was so masterful that Yuder even found himself contemplating whether his rhetorical skills had nearly reached a divine level.

It’s almost like he’s testing the limits of how much Katchian can endure.

Kishiar acted as if he had just discovered the human named Katchian for the first time. It was completely different from the way he had maintained an emotionless distance while feigning friendliness during their previous encounters within the imperial palace.

Sometimes like a clueless fool, and sometimes like a cunning politician who had swallowed a hundred snakes, he had endlessly dragged Katchian into a whirlpool of emotions by skillfully bringing the Emperor and Empress into the conversation. A ceaseless stream of dialogue flowed, where each believed they were asking the other astute questions.

So engrossed in the conversation was Katchian that he only realized how much time had passed when he heard that dessert would be served shortly. He was slightly flustered.

Already?

To calm his excitement, he took a deep breath. The dessert looked as beautiful as a painting, but he was not in the mood to eat.

Duke Peletta kept diverting the topic from the Emperor’s health. The Emperor emptied his teacup three times, and I could smell herbs in two of those cups. He must have been medicated.

It was unmistakable, even from close proximity, that the Emperor was unwell. The Empress couldn’t hide her discomfort every time Katchian seemed to ask a question.

Why did they avoid discussing the Emperor’s health but keep asking about mine? I said I’m still undergoing treatment to dodge any definitive statement about my recovery

The Crown Prince was well enough to resume official activities, but he was still receiving treatment, which the Emperor must surely be aware of. Yet the incessant questions about whether he was fully recovered made him uneasy, and he withdrew a step.

“Crown Prince.”

Just when his head was spinning, the Emperor, seated before his dessert, called out to him with a gravely somber voice.

“The reason I wanted to hear about your health today is that I’ve been thinking of gradually delegating tasks that are difficult for me to handle myself.”

Katchian blinked, taken aback by the unexpected statement.

“What do you mean?”

“There was a recent incident where a monster appeared in the Sun Palace. Fortunately, I was unharmed. However, it made me realize that it would be good to have someone to help out in trying times.”

The Emperor continued.

“But now that we have confirmed that the Crown Prince’s health is still not optimal, we are considering passing on these tasks to Duke Peletta.”

For a moment, Katchian doubted his own ears.

“Pardon?”

“Not all tasks that one wants to undertake can be taken on; health is the primary condition. Duke Peletta meets the requirements to act on behalf of the Emperor and is in good health, so there should be no problem.”

Only then did Katchian understand Emperor Keilusa's intentions.

How cunning.

The focus of today's dinner wasn't the Emperor's health; it was Katchian's. By constantly drawing attention to his state of health, and then turning the tables like this, they were about to stab him in the back.

They had forced Katchian to admit he was still not fully recovered and were now openly planning to give Duke Peletta official power.

Could the aim of his recent strange activities have been leading to this?

He had expected that as long as Emperor Keilusa was alive, he would never easily relinquish his position.

But their alternative was Kishiar La Orr.

Though many might scoff at his decision, Katchian didn't see it that way. He hesitantly spoke, casting an indifferent gaze at Duke Peletta, who seemed to always be grinning like a flower blissfully ignorant of impending calamities.

"Of course, such a decision should naturally have the agreement of others. As the Crown Prince of the Empire, I find it difficult to consent."

"Does this mean, despite your condition, you will undertake all the responsibilities I assign to you?" The Emperor retorted, his eyes unreadable behind his glasses. Katchian responded carefully.

"If entrusted, I will certainly do so. It is the duty of a Crown Prince, after all."

“Duty,” the Emperor quietly repeated the word, then leaned back in his chair, muttering, “Very well, then”

“The task I had intended to entrust to you involves a critical matter related to the palace’s security. To begin with, the culprits behind the recent monster incursion have yet to be caught. I expect you to resolve this matter beyond any doubt.”

Katchian’s eyes widened momentarily. Whether he reacted or not, the Emperor continued.

“Feel free to mobilize anyone affiliated with the Sun Palace. Thoroughly investigate the palace guards who initially investigated the incident, the Cavalry, and other palace personnel. Show no mercy to anyone suspected. You’ve asserted this as your duty, so see it through.”

Katchian was still unaware that the perpetrators of the monster invasion in the Sun Palace were his own healers, as Duke Diarca had yet to mention it to him.

Nevertheless, nobody in the Empire doubted that Diarca was behind itKatchian La Orr included.

Suddenly, Katchian recalled that he had not informed Duke Diarca that he would be dining with the Emperor today. If he accepted this mission without first informing Diarca, would the Duke not become suspicious, especially since Katchian had already once attempted to free himself from Diarca’s influence?

A coarse breath slipped through Katchian’s lips, his gaze shifting towards Duke Peletta.

Kishiar remained silent, merely smiling brightly. Katchian caught sight of him whispering something to his dark-haired subordinate, and felt his head about to explode.

After Katchian had hastily left without uttering another word, Emperor Keilusa stared at the spot where the boy had been for a long time.

In the game of tactics, there is neither a perfect black move nor a perfect white one. It means there are no absolute enemies or allies; the more one obsesses over colors, the deeper they fall into the trap. Emperor Keilusa's brother, Kishiar, had skillfully exploited this concept, delivering a devastating blow to Katchian La Orr's mental state. This had been his entire scheme, written down and sent off that morning.

Although Katchian was still not of age, the Emperor felt it was precisely for this reason that he could not allow him to stay in his position any longer.

He had tried to frame Kishiar using the Apeto family and used that to break free from the Diarca family's influence. Although the attempt had failed and led him to spend the next few months in a state bordering on madness, he had never faced a court of law as a criminal.

It was because Diarca had ultimately sacrificed those who had worked under him, instead of the Crown Prince, for the crimes committed. When the trial was unfolding regarding the horrendous experiments House of Apeto had conducted on the Awakeners above water, quick confessions came from those who were to die in place of the Crown Prince, under the water.

False confessions claiming that they had done everything, not the Crown Prince. Then, mysterious deaths in prison followed by swift closure of the case.

Thanks to Diarca's swift and silent maneuvering, the Crown Prince was officially absolved of the title of murderer. People only remembered the Crown Prince's failed assassination attempt and gossip from the House of Apeto.

But does escaping the blame for a crime make one innocent?

Could Katchian La Orr’s attempt to make Kishiar a murderer be erased?

No. Crimes don’t disappear. Everyone present knew that fact.

Even the Crown Prince knew this, hence he quietly accepted the protection from Diarca he had once tried to shake off. Regardless of his true feelings, he continued to maintain outwardly that he was innocent, merely recovering from a brief illness.

He never once apologized to Kishiar or to those who had been harmed because of him. Not a single official expression of regret had been made. He had merely fled into his palace, and until now, had done nothing but vent his anger.

And there he was, audaciously reading the shadow of death on the Emperors face, an utterly covetous gaze.

This was proof of how lightly Katchian looked upon the Emperor and Kishiar. How could someone raised by Diarca’s hand not belittle the Emperor?

Katchian, and indeed Diarca, were still letting their guard down.

Had they truly been vigilant, Katchian would not have come here today with Kiolle, without notifying Diarca. Had he given prior notice, Diarca would have neither sent Katchian to this gathering nor allowed Kiolle to accompany him.

Furthermore, the Emperor was extremely pleased today because he could confirm from Katchian’s attitude towards Kiolle that, although he was in a position where he couldnt abandon Diarca, he was not fully yielding at heart.

Had the Crown Prince been content and arrogant under Diarcas care, it would have been difficult to find a way in. But if not, the story changes.

While conversing with Katchian, the Emperor reassessed what kind of person this young man was. He was still too young to perfectly mask his expressions and gaze amidst confusion, and sometimes such a gaze revealed more to an observer than a hundred words could.

Katchians crimes were already heavy. Given the chance, he was someone who could commit more.

Perhaps that's why Kishiar had specifically summoned Katchian.

The eyes of the Emperor silently turned towards Kishiar.

In a brief silence, their similar gazes shared an understanding.

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Chapter 582

“Now… it’s truly time for the meal.”

Just because Katchian had left the table first, it didn’t mean that the imperial family’s meal had come to an end.

Originally, the meal attended only by the imperial family and their close associates was divided into two parts. After finishing the first part of the meal with very small amounts of symbolic dishes among the imperial family members, everyone would move to a slightly more intimate setting where the second part would continue.

And today’s second part was much more relaxed than the first. The dishes that were served were designed more for taste and enjoyment than for formality or significance. The atmosphere was also more laid-back, adding to the overall experience.

Yuder was exchanging greetings with Countess Algorita Barnez, the chief maid to the Empress, in the venue where the second part was to be held. He remembered the meals from his past life.

Back then, casual greetings between companions during the second part of the meal were unthinkable. Even if someone had greeted him, Yuder would have only been on guard, never reciprocating. At the time, he had thought it was only natural, but now, the atmosphere felt more comfortable and genuine.

Next to Yuder sat Nathan Zuckerman, who had come along, while Kishiar sat across from him. For this occasion, even the chief attendant remained in front of the table, not as an attendant to the Emperor but in the capacity of a companion.

“The dish we had earlier was delicious, so they’ve served it again. Let’s all try it.”

“My word, this is truly delicious. I’m already looking forward to dessert.”

“Zuckerman is as quiet as ever. How’s the food to your liking?”

The conversation flowed easily, with no one sizing up or defending against each other. Meanwhile, a mountain of dishes, brought over by the others for Yuder, began to pile up in front of him.

‘…Initially, it was just an order to transfer some distant dishes onto a smaller plate. When did it pile up like this?’

“Good, you’re eating well. Here, have another.”

Yuder threw a pointed glance at Kishiar, who discreetly slid another dish in front of him. No matter how he looked at it, half of the piled-up dishes were Kishiar’s doing.

“…”

“What are you looking at me like that for?”

Their eyes met, and Kishiar responded with a brazen smile.

“Oh, that dessert I mentioned will be out soon. I assure you, you’ll love it.”

The ‘dessert mentioned earlier’ was precisely what Kishiar had whispered to Yuder, despite Katchian’s occasional glances.

‘He had told me to look forward to an entirely different dessert in the second part.’

Probably neither Katchian nor anyone else could have imagined that Kishiar would whisper such a thing secretly to Yuder.

Despite the plates already forming a tower, Kishiar nonchalantly slid new dishes into the gaps. The plates Yuder had silently

consumed were piled to one side and taken away by the servants in a cyclical fashion. Compared to when he was dealing with Katchian, Kishiar's expression was incredibly soft and sweet.

Though Yuder was the one eating, for some reason, Kishiar looked as if he was the one enjoying delicious food.

The thought of telling him that he didn't need to go to such lengths vanished when their eyes met.

'…I don't get it. I guess I just eat what is given to me.'

Thankfully, he wasn't full yet.

That day, Yuder managed to finish not only the dishes presented by Kishiar but also those competitively offered by the Emperor and Empress. He successfully consumed numerous dishes and desserts.

When the five-tiered golden dessert towersecretly ordered from the imperial chef by Kishiar, just for himwas finally presented before him, Yuder couldn't help but question the audacity of such a display in the presence of the Emperor. Regardless, it was all consumed in the end.

The Emperor and Empress seemed to have developed a rather misguided impression that Yuder had a special fondness for desserts.

"Kishiar, I heard you met with the legal scholars and high minister today. How did it go?"

Dinner was over. The Empress had already retired to her chambers, leaving Kishiar, Yuder, and their companions alone with the Emperor. Even without asking, it was clear that the Emperor was already fully aware of the day's events at the palace.

"Fortunately, the reception was not bad at all," Kishiar responded.

“Do you need any support from our end?”

Hearing the Emperor’s succinct and unembellished question, Kishiar cracked a slight smile.

“Of course, your support would be beneficial, but not at this moment.”

“I see. I assume you’ve brought me a detailed plan as well. Hand it over.”

“Your Majesty’s prescient words always leave me in awe.”

“Enough with the flattery.”

Chuckling lightly, Kishiar pulled a new sheet of paper from his robe. It contained matters almost identical to those he had discussed with the legal scholars. The Emperor quickly scanned through the document, pushed his glasses back up his nose, and looked up.

“You’ve outlined most of the essential points that must be included in the first set of laws. Simplicity and focus do carry weight.”

“Indeed, Your Majesty.”

“However, wouldn’t discussing matters related to the second gender be too controversial at this point? To expedite the law’s enactment, the priority of this section should be…”

As he spoke, the Emperor’s eyes momentarily met Yuder’s. He paused, his gaze lingering on Yuder’s face for a few seconds before continuing.

“… Nevermind. Consider that comment unsaid. Proceed as you see fit.”

“I appreciate your understanding,” Kishiar replied, smiling.

“If there’s a moment when my support is needed, do not hesitate to inform me.”

“… Very well.”

A long sigh escaped the Emperor’s lips, which now seemed more lively than before. Whether the Emperor sighed or not, Kishiar smoothly transitioned to the next topic.

“Additionally, there is one more matter I would like to discuss, Your Majesty.”

“What is it?”

“I plan to announce the recruitment for the second cohort of Cavalry and the establishment of new branches tomorrow.”

“Tomorrow? That soon?”

“Everything that can be prepared here has already been completed.”

Upon saying this, Kishiar slightly reined in the smile he had been holding.

“Also, contrary to our initial plans, I’d like to be more deeply involved in this project. There are areas where I feel I should personally intervene to ensure things go smoothly.”

“Hmm… Do as you wish.”

“Are you sure, Your Majesty?”

“Why hesitate? If you’re concerned for me, there’s no need.”

Indeed, Kishiar was right. The Emperor looked resolute in his intention to support anything Kishiar aimed to accomplish. If Duke

Peletta was away, the Emperor’s burden would increase, but he now had time and healthluxuries he did not possess before.

There was a warm glow in the eyes of the Emperor, who readily entrusted everything to Kishiar.

“Understood. Thank you, Your Majesty.”

“Speak to me before you leave the capital. I will send you an object imbued with my power. With it by your side, communication should be effortless,” said the Emperor.

“Ah, about that. Your Majesty has quickly become proficient in using your newfound powers, but in my opinion, further training is essential for safer control and growth, is it not?” Kishiar inquired.

“That was your suggestion, yes. Have you found a way?”

“Yes, I have.”

Kishiar, having responded concisely, widened his eyes and spoke, “The assistant beside me, not only is he among the best Awakeners in the Cavalry, but he is also more famously known within the group as our top trainer. Were you aware?”

“No, I was not aware of that particular detail.”

The Emperor turned his head toward Yuder again, this time with a different gaze. “All the skilled individuals you see in the Cavalry are largely due to Yuder’s training methods. He has assisted numerous colleagues who were lost, not knowing how to advance their abilities, and he has been exposed to more powers than anyone else.”

The praise flowed like water.

“I can confidently say that there is no one in this world better than Yuder at understanding and nurturing an Awakener’s abilities. While

it’s true that my assistant will soon leave the capital with me, one doesn’t have to meet in person to assist with training plans.”

Yuder caught a rare expression of surprise on the face of Nathan Zuckerman, who had been listening nearby. It was only natural. Although it seemed like a straightforward matter, upon reflection, it was an extraordinary statement.

Very few people in the world had the qualifications to instruct the Emperor. Those who did were treated very nobly. Even if Yuder’s expertise was confined to the specialized field of Awakener powers, the notion that the Emperor could learn something from a commoner like him was virtually unthinkable.

Had Emperor Keilusa La Orr been a man of ordinary perceptions, he would have naturally sought Kishiar’s help in this situation. However, without dwelling on a potentially offensive remark, the Emperor immediately nodded his approval.

“Very well.”

The corners of the Emperor’s lips faintly rose.

“So Baron Aile not only saved my life but will now also serve as my teacher. Could we have a private discussion about this before you leave?”

Yuder hadn’t expected the Emperor to make a decision so swiftly. Though slightly surprised, he quickly composed himself and bowed his head.

“Yes, of course. But I dare not assume the title of ‘Your Majestys teacher.’ Please, refer to me more casually.”

Yuder’s aim was to help the Emperor further develop and control his power for the sake of his safety; the rest didn’t matter much.

Being formally recognized as the Emperor’s teacher would bring along burdens he’d rather not bear.

Though the Emperor’s Awakener status was a secret for now, it would eventually come to light. Yuder had no wish to stir unnecessary commotion at that point.

What one does might remain the same, but how it is framed can change many things. Yuder subtly redirected his words to express this, but the Emperor, who likely understood his meaning, seemed to be more concerned with something else.

“The more I see, the more I regret. How did it come to this…”

“Excuse me?”

“Never mind. It’s settled.”

The Emperor, swallowing whatever he was mumbling, sighed and spoke.

“While I am in a position where I cannot easily bend, I’ve learned that education is always the exception to all things. In the quest for knowledge, even an Emperor is nothing but a student. So, when teaching me, Baron Aile, consider nothing but the subject matter at hand.”

It was a voice that could not be refuted, for reasons different than those with Kishiar.

And so, Yuder became the Emperor’s unofficial tutor.

A day later, the entire empire was buzzing.

The news of the recruitment of new members for the Cavalry and the establishment of branches had everyone astounded, regardless of their social status, age, or gender.

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Chapter 583

“We’ve disseminated announcements for recruitment in various regions, just like we did for the first Cavalry squad. It will take a bit more time for the news to reach the remote areas, but it shouldn’t take too long.”

The sun poured its light into the splendid Cavalry office.

Several people stood before Kishiar, who was seated with a bundle of papers in one hand, delivering their reports in succession.

The first to report was Nathan Zuckerman, an adjutant who had long been by Kishiar’s side. He had hands-on experience conducting the first round of Cavalry recruitment, so he was now assisting with the second one as well.

Ideally, the recruitment should be handled solely by the Cavalry members. However, the group was still lacking in both manpower and experience. Even a novice mistake could prove fatal at this point. For the team to have the resilience to swiftly correct and forgive such errors, everyone needed more experience under their belts.

Therefore, Kishiar had planned for the second recruitment to be a joint operation between the Pelleta Knights and the Cavalry. Nathan Zuckerman and the others from the Pelleta Knights, having learned from the first recruitment, would help ensure that the Cavalry members could manage future recruitments on their own.

In fact, collaboration between the Pelleta Knights and the Cavalry could have been awkward, but there were no complaints from either side. Thanks to Kishiar, who was both the Duke of Pelleta and the Commander of the Cavalry, relations between the two groups were exceptionally good.

Members of the Pelleta Knights had frequently visited the Cavalry, and they had cooperated closely on various occasions, such as during harvest festivals and missions to the western regions. Moreover, the majority of both groups came from commoner backgrounds and held deep respect and loyalty for Kishiar as their lord.

As a result, a unique camaraderie had developed between the similarly-minded members of the Cavalry and the Pelleta Knights.

After Nathan Zuckerman had finished his report and stepped back, the next in line was Deputy Commander of Jung Division, Kanna Wand.

“Due to the flood of inquiries related to the second recruitment, the entire department that is temporarily in charge of this work is on the verge of being paralyzed. Starting today, we’re assigning members from other Divisions who wish to officially join the administration section,” Kanna Wand reported.

Until now, the members had spent most of their days in skill training and learning. However, the rigorous training had yielded results, and everyone now had a clear understanding of what they needed to train in for their personal growth. Illiteracy was a thing of the past.

Therefore, Kishiar had started to assign the well-taught and rapidly growing members according to their preferences and aptitudes. It was a more advanced classification than just dividing them into three categories based on their abilities: Sul, Shin, and Jung.

Those who were weak in combat but had a knack for administrative tasks took on those roles full-time. Those who were good with people were put in charge of guiding the people who were not members but working within the Cavalry.

While combat-capable members were undoubtedly important, solidifying the internal structure by picking those who were good at other tasks was paramount for the Cavalry's future growth.

Kishiar was already well aware of this need, and it was also something Yuder had desired after watching the Cavalry's progress for a long time.

Kishiar had consulted Yuder multiple times in anticipation of the Cavalry's structural reforms. The extensive personnel reshuffling and internal changes that had taken place were seamlessly executed, incorporating lessons Yuder had learned through trial and error in his previous life.

"Excellent. Keep me closely informed to ensure smooth progress."

"Yes."

Upon hearing Kishiar's praise, Kanna's eyes shone with strength. Despite assuming greater responsibilities than before, there was no hint of apprehension in her eyes. On the contrary, they burned with a desire and ambition to accomplish even more.

After the recent task allocation, Kanna and the other Deputy Commanders came to realize how much Kishiar had been shouldering alone: all these minor yet essential duties. They had never quite understood that meals, clothing, and even the maintenance of the Cavalry's facilities didn't magically take care of themselves.

The moment they recognized that their Commander had single-handedly managed everything until they were mature enough to share the burden was indescribable.

Next, Ever Beck stepped forward. With her characteristic calm demeanor, she quickly began her report.

“News has come in that nobles in the regions where we plan to establish Cavalry branches are showing resistance, as expected. However, their numbers are fewer than anticipated, so the first-phase deployment can proceed as planned.”

Kishiar had already discussed receiving assistance from officials and was planning to send members to various locations to lay the groundwork for new branches. Their tasks included securing land and buildings in the proposed regions and screening initial applicants for the Cavalry.

While the first wave of deployed members were tackling unresolved issues, they would be sending updates back to the Cavalry’s headquarters. Following that, a second wave, including Kishiar and other top-ranking officers, would be dispatched.

Kishiar had been open about these plans. While many still failed to grasp the real extent of Kishiar’s capabilities and criticized him, there was a significant difference between now and the past. More people had started to seriously consider what it meant for Kishiar to act as the Commander of the cavalry, especially after being revealed as the new master of the divine sword.

Moreover, Crown Prince Katchian’s recent assignment to investigate the monster that had invaded the Sun Palace on behalf of the Emperor also played a part in this.

Was it mere coincidence that the announcement of Crown Prince Katchian’s assignment coincided with the Cavalry’s second recruitment drive, both done in the Emperor’s name?

It was a well-known fact that the relationship between the Crown Prince and the Emperor had not been cordial, to say the least. The sudden news that the Crown Prince had taken on this mission for the Emperor rattled many within the noble factions.

Even Duke Diarca’s camp seemed unable to hide their confusion, failing to provide any substantial reaction. They had likely felt the shock of realizing that their assumptions were deeply mistaken.

But the shock the nobles felt didn’t end there.

For the first time in years, the Emperor made a brief appearance in person at a meeting. Although he only stayed for a few minutes and left after a fit of agonizing coughs, it was enough to plunge people into chaos.

‘Is the Emperor really on his deathbed? Has he given up even on receiving treatment and concealing his illness?’

‘Could it be? Is the Cavalry’s hurried second recruitment drive also related to this?’

The air was thick with questions and speculation.

Rumors were circulating that the Emperor had secretly made a deal with the Crown Prince regarding his future actions. The incident of a monster invading the Sun Palace was just the beginning

Could the Crown Prince, who once tried to break away from Diarca, not try it a second time? The fact that he shook hands with the Emperor as soon as he recovered suggests that

Naturally, the cough was an act, and the Emperor had anticipated this reaction.

However, neither Emperor Keilusa nor Kishiar actually thought that this event would have a significant impact on Duke Diarca and his loyal supporters. If the Crown Prince was in his right mind, he would soon offer an explanation, and the situation would be somehow resolved.

Still, the important thing was that the attack had succeeded, if only momentarily creating a small crack.

Prince Katchian was not, as people believed, an absolute pawn of the Diarca ducal house.

If people who had assumed that Duke Diarca's era would naturally follow the current Emperor's death suddenly realized that might not be the case, what would they feel? Merely teaching them that what they thought was a given is not actually so gave this event ample meaning.

And when they recover from this shock, His Majesty will deliver another, allowing the second recruitment of the Cavalry and the establishment of the branch office to go smoothly.

Yuder stood behind Kishiar, listening to reports from others and contemplating future events.

The second recruitment of the Cavalry and establishment of the branch office was certainly important. But it should not be the sole focus of everyone's attention. As Yuder saw it, the Emperor and Crown Prince affair was a bait Kishiar carefully crafted to allow the Cavalry to focus on consolidating their internal strength.

Those who had sharpened their blades to topple the Cavalry could not ignore this astonishing bait.

To use the Emperor of a nation as bait was an extraordinary move, yet neither the Emperor nor Kishiar seemed to mind. Considering the future status of the Cavalry, there could not be a more opportune time.

"Everything is going well so far… except for one thing. This variable called the 'Star of Nagran' is a little concerning."

Yuder recalled the rushed words of the intelligence agents.

They had brought back many useful items from the residence where the sage had stayed. Among them was the surprising information that Nahan had appeared in the capital in good health after disappearing from the west. The sage was currently by the Crown Prince's side, so they had not run into Nahan, but for how long that would last was uncertain.

The Eldore siblings and Gakane, who had directly heard Nahan's voice, all reported that Nahan and his associates seemed incredibly hostile towards the sage. It was not a surprising report.

"Even though many things have changed from my previous life, it seems the internal strife within the Star of Nagran continues.

Nahan wouldn't usually attack other Awakeners. Yet, that wasn't an absolute, as Yuder, who had faced him before, knew all too well.

The sage and Nahan were both dangerous individuals. Yuder, who would soon leave the capital following Kishiar, did not want to leave any variables unresolved.

"Before the last family meal ended, I left a signal for Kiolle. If he's observant, he'll come looking soon."

Yuder had slipped a small note into Kiolle's pocket using the power of wind, right before Prince Katchian left and the previous family meal concluded.

To those uninformed, save for Kiolle, there would be no way of knowing who had sent the message or what it meant. However, if you were the person in question, you would know with certainty who sent it and what they intended to say.

Even Kiolle, as foolish as he is, would understand that much.

"And finally, my assistant mentioned that there was a particular matter he wished to propose today. Shall we hear it now?"

At that moment, Kishiar turned his head to speak, as if concluding that the final report from Steiber had ended. His slightly slanted eyes seemed to already know that Yuder had been lost in other thoughts.

Pushing aside thoughts of the Star of Nagran and Kiolle, Yuder opened his mouth.

“Ah, yes. Before we discuss establishing new branches and recruiting members, there’s something I strongly believe we should address. I had mentioned it before today’s meeting.”

“And what would that be?”

“I propose we create a power control device specifically for the Awakeners within the Cavalry.”

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Chapter 584

“I propose we create a power control device specifically for the Awakeners within the Cavalry.”

Yuder’s unexpected statement led everyone else to look at him with undisguised curiosity.

“A power control device for the Awakeners? What’s it for?”

Ever cautiously asked first. The name itself hinted at what the object might be, but she couldn’t understand why Yuder was proposing its creation now.

Yuder glanced at Kishiar, who seemed to fully grasp his intentions, then at Nathan, who appeared unperturbed, and finally at the Deputy Commanders, who were filled with questions and concerns. He opened his mouth to speak.

“Knights capable of wielding Aura, as well as mages, each have their own devices to temporarily control their powers. However, there’s nothing of the sort for the Awakener yet.”

“Wouldn’t it be better if such a thing didn’t exist?”

Steiber questioned with a contemplative look.

“Do we really need a device to forcibly control our powers? Wouldn’t that be like shackling ourselves?”

“It may seem that way, but”

“Throughout history, knights and mages have created their own control devices. Even the now-obsolete divine power-limiting spells

were crafted by Orhe, the Messenger of the Sun God. Why do you think they made such choices?”

Kishiar interjected smoothly before Yuder could complete his sentence. The Deputy Commanders collectively fell into deep thought. Kanna was the first to respond.

“Is it because if we’re to coexist with those who don’t possess powers, such a measure becomes necessary?”

Kishiar smiled.

“That’s one reason, yes. But consider what we’ve experienced in the West, and you’ll see there’s another need.”

“Ah… I see. It’s a matter of being able to control our powers.”

Ever answered with a slightly furrowed brow.

“Not everyone can control their abilities as well as we can. Some may go berserk; others may wish to lose their newly acquired powers. There’s no guarantee that such individuals won’t appear within the Cavalry in the future. Also”

“Also?”

Kishiar urged Ever to continue.

“It would be necessary for individuals like those Awakeners from the Star of Nagran we captured in the West, wouldn’t it?”

“Excellent.”

Precisely. Yuder nodded toward Ever.

“That’s right. It’s not the only reason, but all of these are why I believe a power control device is necessary.”

The Cavalry has jurisdiction over all issues related to the Awakeners. This meant that what happened with the Star of Nagran was just the beginning. They would have to continue addressing countless issues with Awakenershelping them, and at times, passing judgment.

Currently, the absence of a means to control the Awakeners made handling them in urgent situations excessively cruel.

Initially, the regular non-Awakener knights who captured the Awakeners from the Star of Nagran had argued for piercing their clavicles and leg bones with chains to restrain them. They did so claiming that these individuals were too dangerous and uncontrollable.

It was only because the Cavalry objected and opted for round-the-clock surveillance that this harsh measure was avoided. But what if they hadn't established a temporary base in the West? Ever and Kanna had both witnessed this firsthand.

However, keeping a 24-hour watch on the Awakener wasn't ordinary even for the Cavalry. It had been feasible only because it was a special circumstance and involved only a few individuals. Going forward, they wouldn't be able to manage all offending Awakeners in the same manner. This was already the case with the Hosanna, and Gayle and Doyle brothers they were currently monitoring.

In places beyond the reach of the Cavalry, numerous Awakeners were still being judged uncontrollable without proper investigation. They were either killed or mutilated. Such practices continued until the invention of power control devices specifically for the Awakeners in Yuder's previous life.

Although the power control devices couldn't fully restrain the power of someone as strong as Yuder, they did serve as appropriate measures for those at risk of going berserk, those who simply

wanted to live quietly, and those who had committed crimes but were not deserving of the death penalty.

After the invention of these devices, Yuder personally experienced how much could change depending on whether there were means of control. There were those who misused the control devices, of course, but that was the nature of all things in the world. Despite its drawbacks, some method of control was indeed necessary.

Ancient people who created control devices for knights, mages, and priests must have thought the same.

“Indeed it’s necessary for the Awakeners in places out of the Cavalry’s reach. There are too many people in danger just for being Awakeners,” Kanna muttered, nodding her head.

As she said, current Awakeners were threatened simply for manifesting their powers. It was even worse if their appearance significantly changed from that of an ordinary person. People feared what was different and uncontrollable, wishing to eliminate it.

Thanks to the limited effectiveness of the power control devices, Yuder, who had experienced ‘all sorts of control methods,’ knew these feelings very well.

“Hmm I get your point. But do we have someone in the Cavalry capable of creating such a device?” Steiber looked worriedly at Kishiar.

“Let’s first hear what the assistant thinks about it.”

“Alright. Since it’s a device for controlling power, researching existing control devices should be the first step. In fact, devices for mages are more abundant and frequently used, so it would be beneficial to seek the assistance of those knowledgeable about them.”

“A control device for mages, and people who know about it. So, it all comes down to mages.”

“Yes, fortunately, we have several mage allies staying with the Cavalry. Moreover dont we currently have someone who is both a mage and an Awakener?”

“Ah”

For a moment, the same name crossed everyone’s mind. Thais Yulman, a mage engaged in research within the Cavalry, and Hellem, who had recently joined, were well-known to all present.

And Thais Yulman’s apprentice, Alik Pelgin, had become an Awakener after joining the Cavalry. That was also a peculiar situation.

In his previous life, Emperor Katchian and some unknown mage had created the power control devices. But there was no reason to follow the same path in this life. Even if he didn’t know who the original creator was, he knew what the devices were based on. He just had to create them, no matter the approach.

‘Besides, it would be easier to maintain secrecy and minimize misuse if we develop it within our group,’ Yuder thought.

“That makes sense. It seems like the most appropriate choice. Let’s proceed that way,” Kishiar concluded, smiling at Yuder.

“Since you brought it up, you’re responsible. After the meeting, you’ll accompany me to discuss it further. How does that sound?”

“I’ll do that.”

The expressions of the others remained unchanged upon hearing this. However, one person, Kanna, was different. Yuder saw her cast a nuanced, warm, yet awkward smile in his direction.

“‘Does she think Kishiar is playing tricks on me?’

The meeting ended shortly after, leaving the question unanswered. Yuder headed to the lab of Thais Yulman, where Alik was, with Kishiar in a strange mood.

“A control device for the Awakener… you want me to make it?

Alik, who usually assisted his master Thais in his research, was startled once by Kishiar’s appearance, and again when Kishiar indicated he wanted a private word.

And then he was so shocked by the ensuing proposal that he almost fell backward.

“You’re a mage, so you must know the principles behind magic control devices.

“Well yes?

“I know you’ve been researching the power of the Awakener diligently with your master. Given that, who would be more suitable for this job than you?

“But my expertise in creating magic devices is only basic. Wouldn’t it be better to ask my master

“No, it has to be you.

Alik turned his head in surprise at Yuder’s soft-spoken words.

“It is said that one can’t understand mages without understanding magic power. Likewise, if one doesn’t understand the power of the Awakener, one can’t understand the Awakener themselves. The person who creates this control device must truly understand that it is not merely for restraint.

Alik’s expression lost some of its shock and fear upon hearing this.

“I see… During my time researching this power with my master, I had considered the issue of control as well. While magic power can be regulated in multiple ways if it causes problems, the power of the Awakener has no such alternatives. It’s extremely risky.

Since first becoming Awakener, Alik had been delighted that he seemed to be able to use elemental magic. However, as he continually studied and improved his initially feeble powers, he came to realize that this power was very different from magic.

An Awakener is just thatan Awakener, not a mage.

They may look similar on the surface, but they are not the same. The mysterious power of the Awakener could sometimes be uncontrollable, even by the person possessing it.

If Alik had encountered similar difficulties while learning magic, he could have easily controlled it using various means. However, when researching the power of the Awakener, he had to work twice as hard just to barely control it.

As Yuder had pointed out, no other mage understood the need and purpose of control as clearly as Alik did.

Though Alik Pelgin was a mage, he was also an Awakener. Only he could truly grasp his own identity, not his master.

After pondering deeply, Alik finally nodded his head heavily.

“Alright. I’ll give it a try. This could benefit me as well.

“Good decision. Let me know if you need anything. But, by the way

With a graceful smile, Kishiar suddenly scrutinized Alik anew.

“It’s not just that you’ve become Awakeneryou’ve manifested the second gender?’

‘Second gender? Alik?’

Yuder, who had never heard of this, turned his head to find Alik swallowing nervously, his face flushed.

“Ah! Can, can you see that? Is it because of the scent…?

As Alik hastily fanned himself, as if trying to dissipate his sweat, Yuder also faintly sensed a fragrance.

“When did you reach this stage, Alik? Last time, you certainly hadn’t…”

“It wasn’t long ago. Around the time of the Cavalry party, I think I considered reporting it to you separately, but I still can’t believe that I’ve manifested as a second gender, so”

Alik heavily confessed that he had manifested as an Omega. It now made sense why he had kept the fact of his manifestation a secret and didn’t want to talk about it. Many male Awakeners often felt a great shock just by the fact that they could bear children if they manifested as a second gender Omega. Alik must have felt the same.

“But considering how recent your manifestation is, your scent is incredibly faint. Is there some sort of problem?”

“No, it’s probably because of the medicine I developed with my master.”

“Medicine? When did you start researching that? I’ve never heard of it.”

Kishiar slightly furrowed his brow. Alik hurriedly clarified that the medicine was not dangerous at all.

“After I manifested my second gender, I found the transition a bit difficult, so my master created a medicine that suppresses the scent using improved magic herbs. Although my master is currently focusing on magic energy research, he used to be an authority on magic plants. So, anyway”

The effects of the medicine that Alik had personally tested on himself turned out to be surprisingly good. Despite his recent manifestation, his scent was hardly noticeable, and his physical condition seemed as good as ever.

The slight scent that was emanating from him now was only because he had missed a dose that morning. According to Alik, if he maintained the original dosage and frequency, he would be no different from before his second gender manifestation. At Alik’s words, Yuder felt considerable surprise and shock for the first time in a while.

‘He was able to create something like that?’

“Ah, of course, it’s still in the process of improvement but once I’ve tested it thoroughly and find it satisfactory, I was planning to report it to you. Really!”

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Chapter 585

In the current times, it wasn't an exaggeration to say that individuals with second gender experiencing their heat period had no other option but to lock themselves away and rest after taking strong sedatives. The isolation and induced sleep not only reduced the amount of pheromones emitted but also shortened the duration of their heat period.

Though it might only reduce a week-long period to 3-4 days, there was no other viable alternative. The situation had been the same in Yuder's past life.

'No, it was even worse back then. With the increasing number of Awakeners, the number of beings with second gender also surged.'

Nowadays, unless you were part of special organizations like the Cavalry or the Star of Nagran, where Awakeners clustered, it was rare to even encounter one Awakener in a village. Even if someone exhibited traits of second gender, the chances of meeting an individual with an opposing second gender were quite low, reducing the likelihood of complications.

However, the number of Awakeners would only continue to increase, never decrease. Soon enough, even the average non-Awakener people would become aware of how beings with second genders experienced their heat periods and what pheromones were.

One of the things Yuder had hoped to change the most since returning to the past was exactly that issue. While Yuder had made strides in spreading a new understanding about Omega Awakeners, it was still far from sufficient.

In Yuder's view, the primary reason Omega individuals suffered so much in his past life was due to the overpowering scent they

emitted during their heat period. This scent, even more potent than that of Alpha individuals, attracted the unsavory attention of non-Awakener powerbrokers.

Though the scent only affected other individuals with second genders, just the ability to perceive it led society to treat Omega individuals like undignified beasts. Rumors began to circulate that perverse, wealthy individuals were buying Omegas for their alleged enhancing or aphrodisiac properties, even though no evidence supported such claims.

Fixing a reputation is much more difficult than tarnishing one, especially in an era where people indulged in hedonistic pleasures without thought for tomorrow.

‘It might have started around then. The number of highly skilled Omega individuals fit for the Cavalry began to decrease…’

In the early days of the Cavalry, Awakeners were still a new phenomenon, and the number of beings with second genders was extremely low. Omegas were not necessarily less skilled than Alphas. Discrimination based on second gender was virtually nonexistent.

However, as time passed and negative perceptions about Omegas increased, newly Awakeners manifesting as Omegas found their abilities to be notably weaker.

Back then, the origin of this trend was unknown. But now, watching the research of Thais Yulman and the Awakening of Emperor Keilusa, Yuder felt he was beginning to understand.

‘If they were biased against Omega manifestation from the start, then their abilities would naturally not develop fully.’

In that context, the medicine Thais Yulman had created for his student who became an Omega was revolutionary. Yuder wasn’t yet

sure about the exact potency of the medicine, but if it could alleviate the suffering of individuals with second genders during their heat period, he was prepared to do whatever it took.

With determined eyes, Yuder looked over at Kishiar.

“It’s an incredible medicine. I never knew such a thing could exist. Wouldn’t it be best to start supporting that first?”

Yuder was also hearing of the medicine’s existence for the first time. Kishiar surely understood the significance.

“I’ll do just that. I find it immensely intriguing myself.”

They took Alik with them to the laboratory to meet Thais Yulman. The old mage readily accepted their request to produce and improve more of the medicine designed for Awakeners with second genders.

“Hmm, well, alright. I was already thinking of making some adjustments for my disciple anyway. If you’ll also support it, then…”

“Yes. I’d like you to develop a method for mass production as quickly as possible.”

“Mass production, you say… How many people do you expect to use it monthly?”

“At least a thousand people should be able to take it consistently each month. And it should also be easy to store.”

“Heh. I’ve heard that even within the Cavalry, the number of Awakeners with second genders is quite limited. Is such a scale really necessary? I appreciate that you value this medicine, but if I have to produce it on such a large scale alone, my back might give out.”

“If it were just for the Cavalry, there wouldn’t be a need for that. However, I believe… that this medicine could become a valuable asset for both you and us in the future. Moreover, it could significantly help the world.”

“Asset, you say? Are you planning to sell it?”

“Yes. You must be aware that the number of Awakeners is steadily increasing. Consequently, the number of Awakeners with second genders will also rise, and many who are struggling for the same reasons as your disciple will benefit from this medicine.”

“I see your point.”

“I propose that the Cavalry exclusively manufacture, sell, and distribute this medicine. In return, we’ll share a portion of the revenue with you and your disciple. It may not seem profitable now, but I guarantee that within 10 years, you and your disciple will gain significant wealth and fame.”

Thais Yulman, while much happier satisfying his own curiosity than benefiting humanity, cared deeply for his one and only disciple, Alik. Even if it seemed like he was exploiting Alik, the fact that the boy could produce such a miraculous medicine proved his worth. And conducting research always required funds. Like the Western Mage Union that faced difficulties due to a lack of research funding, many mages always sought wealthy patrons.

Thais Yulman, an Elder of the Pearl Tower and a man who lacked nothing, was no exception to this rule.

‘More money is always good. Alik should also start making a name for himself, rather than just remaining under me. If they’re going to handle all the annoying parts once the medicine is developed… There’s no reason to refuse.’

Thais Yulman cheerfully accepted Kishiar’s proposal.

“What percentage of the profits will you be sharing?”

“We’ll determine that later, once we have fully assessed the medicine’s efficacy and commercial value.”

“That sounds fair. Understood.”

“Then it’s settled.”

Kishiar lightly smiled and subtly turned his gaze toward Yuder. Yuder lifted the corner of his lips in satisfaction with the decision.

“Was there ever such a medicine in the previous game?”

Kishiar quietly asked Yuder on their way back from Thais Yulman’s lab.

“No, there wasn’t. If I had known that such a medicine could be created, I would have mentioned it earlier.”

“How did you overcome the obstacle back then?”

“It wasn’t much different from now. The best solution was to improve sleeping medicines and secure a space where they could rest while asleep.”

During his time as a Commander, Yuder used various local branches as shelters to protect Omegas going through their heat periods. Anyone experiencing an impending heat period could visit a Cavalry branch, receive sleeping medicines, and use the isolation facilities.

“That’s a good approach. I’ll consider it once the establishment of the branches is complete.”

“However, as the number of branches increases, management becomes more difficult and we reach limitations. It would be great if all the members at each branch followed orders from higher up, but

that’s often not the case. Particularly with Omegas, their scent becomes stronger during their heat, so prioritizing the supply of medicines would be advisable.”

Kishiar chuckled softly. Yuder, puzzled by his laughter at what wasn’t exactly a laughing matter, turned his head to find Kishiar caressing his cheek.

“Sometimes I’ve thought you were wiser than your years. But just now, you sounded like a seasoned manager whos worked for 20 years.”

Yuder might not have 20 years of experience as a Cavalry Commander, but given the intensity and results of his work, it could well have been 30 years.

However, Yuder didn’t respond, sensing a hint of bitterness in Kishiar’s smile.

“I’ve noticed you’ve always been particularly concerned about Omegas among the Awakeners with second genders. Did you already know you’d manifest as Omega?”

“Yes.”

“Have you had difficulties due to scents before? Or is there something related expected to happen?”

Despite his gentle tone, Kishiars red eyes appeared sharp and cautious, missing nothing. Knowing what he might be suspecting, Yuder answered with as neutral a face as possible.

“Neither, in my case. I’m the only person with second gender who has never had issues due to scent or heat periods.”

“Why? I mean, this time around your scent is noticeable, and although you haven’t gone through a heat period yet, probably…”

His red gaze fixated on Yuders face. Yuder knew what was left unsaid. These days, he could subtly sense Kishiars scent drifting to him during everyday activities, an indication that his body was becoming more sensitive.

“I don’t really know the reason. What I do know is that Ive seen many people with second genders struggle with related issues, but they’ve never affected me.”

This wasn’t the case in his previous life. But this time would be different.

Where did that difference stem from?

Upon deep thought, one point stood out.

In my previous life, Kishiar died after I experienced a series of strange, connected phenomena. Now, he hasn’t died.

Kishiar remained silent for a while, deep in thought. Sensing his eyes darkening somewhat, Yuder decided to change the subject.

“By the way, Commander.”

“Yes.”

“How do you plan to mass-produce the medicines?”

“Well… usually, the merchant guilds specialize in this. I’m thinking of contracting with the Shuden Trading Company for production and distribution.”

Kishiar answered quickly, as if he had thought it all through beforehand.

“If it’s just within the Empire, centralizing it around the Cavalry would suffice. But if it’s a product that needs to be spread globally,

we'll need the company's influence. Shuden might not be very large, but they are trustworthy, so there shouldnt be any issues there."

"Indeed, that must be the case."

Judging by the way he spoke, Kishiar seemed to have had considerable experience with matters like this since his days as the Duke of Peletta. The fact that he had never shown any signs of financial strain, despite having only the barren land of Peletta as his territory, suggested that his success wasn't solely due to his imperial lineage.

'I seem to recall Mick Shuden had connections with Kishiar since he established the trading company in Peletta… Perhaps Kishiar has been amassing wealth this way since then.'

It was not uncommon for nobles to keep trading companies under their sway. The now-imprisoned Duke Tain, for instance, had exploited the trading companies in the west to fill his own coffers.

Even though Kishiar had become the Duke of Peletta at a rather young age, it seemed likely that he could have pulled off something like that.

"Why are you looking at me like that?"

"Oh, no reason. I was just thinking that I hope this venture goes well."

"Don't worry, it will."

Kishiar smiled faintly.

"If it's something you wish for, it will undoubtedly come to pass."

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Chapter 586

Within the vast territory that nearly encompassed half of the 7th Wall District of the capital, lay the Imperial Knights' compound.

Cautiously scanning his surroundings, Kiolle Diarca descended from the carriage that had entered the compound. Though his position had shifted to that of the Crown Prince's escort knight, his fundamental affiliation was still with the Imperial Knights. Despite having no need to act so cautiously, his shoulders remained tense, filled with an uneasy energy.

"Ah? Is that you, Sir Diarca?"

"Wha!"

Suddenly, someone called out to Kiolle from behind. For a brief moment, he tensed up as if he had been struck by lightning. Quickly composing himself, he creakingly turned his head towards the source of the voice.

Two members of the Imperial Knights, whose names he couldn't even recall, offered him a casual salute.

"Indeed, it is you, Sir Diarca. What brings you here?"

"You haven't been here in a while. If you have any business, would you like us to assist you?"

Their faces were filled with warm smiles. However, Kiolle's expression had long since turned sour, as if crumpled paper.

"…Are you implying that I have no reason to be here unless I have some business?"

“Huh?”

The knights who had initiated the conversation blinked in surprise at his irritable reaction.

“No, no, not at all. We were just happy to see you after such a long time!”

“Yes, exactly. We can assist you with your duties and perhaps catch up a little”

“Do I look like someone who can’t handle my own affairs without help? Also, this isn’t a place where common knights should be idly wandering during duty hours. Who said you could be so blatantly lazy here?”

“…”

Of course, that was the official protocol. But how many in the Imperial Knights actually followed it? Especially coming from Kiolle Diarca, who barely managed to enlist thanks to his family name and was rumored to be inferior even to the lowest-ranked knights in skill!

“Associating with lazy people like you is an insult to me. I have no conversation to share with people whose names I don’t even remember. Leave.”

Truth be told, the knights had approached Kiolle not out of genuine kindness but because they thought it amusing to engage with the scorned youngest son of the Diarca Ducal House. They felt chills run down their spines, as if he had read their minds.

“So Diarca is still Diarca, huh”

“I’ve heard rumors that a lot of people have underestimated him lately. Seems they were true.”

They reluctantly retreated, unable to utter another word.

Left alone, Kiolle didn’t let down his guard until they had completely disappeared. Then he finally relaxed his tense back and gritted his teeth.

“That damn Cavalry bastard Not only can I not crawl up to him, but he dares to summon me here?!”

The reason for his visit was a hastily-written note he had received secretly during the imperial family meal. Scrawled in it were a few numbers and a word. After some thought, Kiolle had deduced that these indicated a date, time, and the name of the Imperial Knights’ training ground. This particular training ground was shared by both the Cavalry and the Imperial Knights. It was also the place where Yuder had previously given the Imperial Knights a sound thrashing. As soon as he had realized this, the sender’s identity and intentions became crystal clear in his mind.

Since the Cavalry was located within the grounds of the Imperial Knights, visiting under the pretext of some task was simple. The Crown Prince would naturally not suspect him. However, the fact that he had to comply with Yuder’s instructions, even while aware of all this, was irksome.

Damn it! What was up with those guys just now? I thought I had been found out, scared me for a second.

The knights had been more irritable than usual when they spoke, making him anxious that his motives might be revealed. What he didn’t realize, however, was that the knights had read their own base intentions in his irritation, thinking he was appropriately expressing aristocratic disdain.

Thus, the reputation of Kiolle Diarca rose once more that day.

“Youre here.”

“That’s all you have to say after calling me all the way here?”

What else was he supposed to say? Yuder silently observed Kiolle, who stood awkwardly in a corner of the empty training ground. Precisely three seconds after their eyes met, the air seemed to deflate from Kiolles puffed-up liver, and his previous fears returned.

Avoiding Yuder’s scrutinizing gaze, Kiolle turned his head and spoke.

“… I said to His Highness the Crown Prince that I had some business to attend to at the Imperial Knights. I don’t think hed suspect me, but just in case, I’ll return as soon as possible.”

“Hmm, alright. No need to drag this out.”

Yuder extended his hand towards Kishiar, unambiguously.

“Hand it over.”

“What, what are you talking about?”

“The information we agreed to exchange. Naturally, you should be the one to go first, since youre likely to have less valuable information.”

While Kiolle couldn’t argue with the logic, being demanded like that made him feel as though he had been reduced to a pet. He clenched his teeth, but he couldn’t help but speak first.

“I’ve been keeping a close eye on those charlatans. I don’t know if you’re already aware, but after the last party where we met, theyve mostly been in the Bright Palace, making it easier to watch them.”

Yuder nodded; he already knew that the Awakeners from the Star of Nagran, including the sage, had been staying at the Bright Palace for a long time. Kiolle continued.

“What Ive noticed is that there’s absolutely no chance that they are benevolent healers. They hardly ever leave their lodgings, except when they come out to treat the Crown Prince. But whenever they did show up, I followed them to see what they were up to. I even followed them into filthy restrooms, you know?”

Yuder sighed as he looked at Kiolle’s innocently blinking eyes.

‘I did say it might be better to directly ask, but I never suggested following them into bathrooms

“Alright, just tell me what you found. If I deem it useless, I will only share equally useless information in return.”

“You sly even if it’s useful, you could just say it’s not!”

“Why would I do that? If you bring valuable information, its in my interest to reciprocate, so that our relationship continues to be mutually beneficial.”

””

“It’s common sense if you have a brain, don’t you think?”

“Are you saying I dont have a brain?!”

Having met Yuder several times now, Kiolle seemed to have developed a knack for understanding even his subtle insults. His fists clenched in irritation, but he had no choice but to start recounting what he had observed.

“… Listen, the reasons I suspect theyre charlatans are as follows.”

Since meeting Yuder, Kiolle had resolved to tail the so-called healers wherever they went.

He endured even the most distasteful activities just to understand their actions. He questioned them, observed them eating, and even followed them when they left their lodging for walks. Eventually, they became so wary of Kiolle that just the sound of his footsteps was enough to make them visibly uncomfortable.

However, the middle-aged man who seemed to be their leader was an exception.

Unlike the young healers who couldn't hide their discomfort and fear around Kiolle, this man had no fear. He always spoke with an overly polite tone that was almost irritating, bowing his head and adding, as if cursing, that if anyone wanted treatment, they should come to him. The way he spoke made him sound as insufferable as a pompous priest.

But this man was also the one whom Crown Prince Katchian trusted and kept by his side the most. Therefore, Kiolle decided to witness firsthand the moment these men had a direct meeting with the Crown Prince.

At this point, Yuder's eyes sparkled with intrigue.

"So you finally saw it?"

"Yes."

After meeting Yuder, Kiolle had worked hard to gather information about these people. In order to win the Crown Prince's favor, he bowed his head more deeply than before. Perhaps because the Crown Prince had started to trust him more after the Cavalry party incident, Kiolle had finally gained the honor of attending the Crown Prince's treatment sessions.

Kiolle then described what he had seen with a serious expression.

“The treatment was as simple as I’ve heard. The aged leader would sit beside His Highness, who was lying on the bed, take his hand, and engage in what seemed like an endless conversation. The others sat quietly, burning incense and herbs… Occasionally, they would summon servants to refill the Crown Prince’s tea. That was it.”

Truthfully, it was so dull that Kiolle had almost dozed off halfway through. But he could swear that this really was the extent of it.

“It was as if they were merely discussing health and emotions, no magical aura or anything. How could this even be considered treatment? They are charlatans, pure and simple. Do you really believe they are Awakeners? Hard to believe based on this alone.”

“…”

Afterwards, Kiolle subtly suggested to the Crown Prince that these healers seemed to be getting a lot of respect for doing nothing. As a result, Kiolle was ordered to wait outside during future treatment sessions.

‘This guy… He’s treated as lesser than even the sage.’

If it weren’t for Kiolle being Diarca, Crown Prince Katchian would’ve probably driven him away without a word. Yuder sighed and clicked his tongue inaudibly.

The absurd and laughable part was, Kiolle still believed that the Crown Prince was gaining more trust in him day by day.

“His Highness shares tea and strategic games with me every other day now. And I was the only one permitted to accompany him during meals recently. He trusts me,” Kiolle said.

“Uh-huh… Sure.”

Yuder suspected that it was more likely for Katchian to engage with someone he considered easy to handle than with someone he genuinely trusted. He guessed that either the Crown Prince had realized Kiolle was less clever than he appeared, or Kiolle had inadvertently revealed a vulnerability he himself was unaware of. It was a remarkably accurate conjecture.

“Ah, but aside from the aged leader who primarily performs the treatments, the younger ones do seem to be true Awakeners.”

Ever since their arrival, the number of rats in the Bright Palace had increased, and rumors about ghosts had started circulating. Kiolle had even heard soldiers, who were on night duty, say that they couldn’t move forward on paths they knew well, as if a wall had suddenly appeared.

In the past, he hadn’t believed it, but after hearing from Yuder that they were Awakeners, he couldn’t just dismiss it lightly. He volunteered for several night shifts. Other soldiers and knights were shocked, but he insisted. As a result, he discovered that the rumors were, to some extent, true.

“It was dawn. I was going to the bathroom when I found four rats gathered in a circle, their tails intertwined as they spun around.”

“And then?”

“I drew my sword and shouted, and they vanished.”

The next day, Kiolle hounded the healers, interrogating them if they knew anything about the incident. Complaints about filthy rats appearing because of those unfortunate newcomers were just a bonus. The healers dispersed, avoiding Kiolle’s gaze without uttering a word.

After that, all the tales of rat sightings around Bright Palace ceased entirely. So did the soldiers’ eerie stories. People guessed

that Kiolle must have been dreaming, but Kiolle believed it was no mere coincidence.

“And you know… this is a bit of a different topic, but I think it’s certain that my father was unaware of their true nature.”

“Why do you think that?”

“After they visited our home, Father asked a lot of questions about them. In my opinion”

“Hold on.”

Yuder raised his hand to interrupt him.

“Did the healers meet your father? The Duke of Diarca?”

“Yes.”

“When did they go to see him? For what reason?”

“Well, it was not too long ago. I think Father wanted to hear directly from the healers about the Crown Prince’s treatment. Is that important?”

“…”

‘Of course it’s important. What could be more important?’

The Duke of Diarca, who had only dealt with the healers indirectly up until now, had for the first time personally met them. How could such an event not be significant? Yuder clenched his fist for a moment before loosening it again.

“Tell me again. Properly. The exact timing and everything you saw that day.”

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Chapter 587

“Repeat it. Tell me again, this time in exact detail, about what you saw that day.”

Kiolle had insisted that the information he’d gathered painstakingly over time, observing the healers, was far more important. However, his claims fell on deaf ears in the face of Yuder’s judgement, who deemed other information more valuable.

Frustrated, Kiolle had no choice but to recount the events of the day Yuder was interested in.

“A while ago, right after that incident at the Sun Palace, I heard that they would be coming to our house. My father didnt tell me about it, so I only found out through rumors. Not that it matters; it wasn’t anything I needed to know. Still, I had to keep an eye on them, didn’t I? So, I decided to take charge and bring them myself.”

Given that they were staying at the Crown Prince’s palace, and Kiolle was working there as well, guiding them was simple enough.

Kiolle escorted a middle-aged man, who was the leader of the healers, along with one nervous young apprentice, to the Diarca estate. Even among the crowded mansions in the Third Wall District, the Diarca residence was renowned for its elegance. The young healer seemed to shrink in its presence, his shoulders hunched and his spirit subdued.

But the middle-aged leader was a different story. He walked with head held high, following Kiolle. His demeanor remained unchanged, even in front of Duke Diarca, as if harboring some secret scheme.

He greeted the Duke and his attending nobles with a respectful yet unobsequious attitude.

“Hello, my name is Ajihen Toom.”

Ah, yes, that was his name. Kiolle vaguely remembered that the man had introduced himself with that name before the Crown Prince some time ago.

“Ajihen Toom? Doesn’t that mean ‘wise one’ in ancient language? Not your real name then. How pretentious to call yourself wise.”

A noble beside the Duke sneered. Behind their fans, cold laughter emanated as they looked down upon the healers. The young healer appeared to be so frightened that he was almost prostrating himself.

“Indeed, its not my birth name. But if a name is never called or bears no significance, can it truly be considered mine?”

“What are you trying to say?”

“I have no family. But I do have comrades who are like family to me. Therefore, the name they call me is my name. You summoned me here to see me as I am with my comrades; hence my name is indeed Ajihen Toom.”

“Smooth talker, aren’t you?”

Duke Diarca, sitting in the highest seat, murmured with narrowed eyes.

“Fine, call yourself whatever you wish. What matters is the explanation for your recent actions. If you want to be called wise, then so be it.”

“Thank you.”

“But your words alone wont convince me. Show me this wisdom youre so proud of.”

No matter his age, Duke Diarca remained formidable. His natural malice, his oppressive aura, and his cold gaze that reduced everyone to mere objects had an instant, crushing effect on all.

Even the audacious middle-aged man who'd asked to be called wise wasnt entirely immune. Kiolle, standing at a safe distance behind the healers, noticed beads of sweat forming on the back of the mans neck, despite his seemingly serene face.

The moment he said that, the man started to feel even more like a joke and a scammer.

Of course. In this world, there could be no other madman who wouldn't be scared when facing his father except for Yuder Aile. That man was a calamity all by himself. Even if those healers were true Awakeners, they couldn't be more impressive than someone who single-handedly spewed flames reaching the sky and decapitated a monster the size of a house.

"Understood. However, before I proceed with my story, I would like you to first pay attention to the colleague I have brought with me."

As the sage extended his hand, the young man hunched behind him flinched and raised his head. He was a young man with a complexion resembling the southern people, his skin a deep red, and a distinct scar tearing through one of his ears.

"His name is Diemon. For you to fully believe what I am about to tell you, his assistance is absolutely necessary."

"So, he's going to perform some tricks?"

Another noble jeered lightly. The sage remained unflappable. Duke Diarca waved his hand in annoyance, granting permission.

"Fine. Kiolle, you may leave."

Duke Diarca decided not to let Kiolle hear the conversation he was about to have with the healers. Yet Kiolle didnt seem to mind as he retreated immediately, heading to his room.

He heard the healers spoke for several hours in front of his father and the other nobles. Surprisingly, they returned to the palace without being thrown out.

“I dont know what they discussed that day. During dinner, the only thing my father asked me was about the likelihood of me becoming a Swordmaster if I diligently practiced swordsmanship, and how competent Theorado, the current Commander of the Imperial Knights, was. But it’s true that my father has since been curious about those men.”

At this point, Yuder’s expression changed.

However, Kiolle continued, blissfully unaware.

Whenever Duke Diarca encountered Kiolle afterward, he would subtly ask about the healerswhat they were like in the palace, how close they were to the Crown Prince.

“I obviously told him that I hardly saw them outside of being near the Crown Prince. If my father had known about them from the start, would he bother to ask me such questions? Clearly, even he’s been deceived by those men!”

So after all this astonishing revelation, that’s your conclusion?

Yuder looked at Kiolle, whose naivete was overwhelming, and realized anew how his obliviousness was a double-edged sword.

‘What a close call that I heard this information in detail today.’

Even if the sage had genuinely met Duke Diarca without any incident, this information was critical. Moreover, this meeting

happened after the event at the Sun Palace and was the first direct conversation between Duke Diarca and the sage.

And not everyone was there. If Kiolle was to be believed, only the sage and the false sage from his previous life were present.

‘How could this not be important?’

Although Kiolle was horribly inarticulate and lacked observational skills or talent, he was still the son of Duke Diarca. Everything he nonchalantly observed and heard was inaccessible yet crucial information from the outside.

A chill ran down his spine, and his head spun. Yuder dredged up all the information he had gathered so far and added Kiolle’s story to it.

The conclusion he reached after some time was simple.

‘It’s certain that those men infiltrated the Sun Palace.’

Moreover, the aggressive and cruel tactics of summoning monsters and controlling animals and humans were not necessarily the will of Duke Diarca. It seemed as though the individuals involved had chosen this course of action themselves.

Kishiar had already suspected that the events were not typical of Duke Diarca’s modus operandi. If Duke Diarca had summoned the sage immediately afterward, looking perturbed, then it would have been safe to assume it was indeed his doing.

Duke Diarca prefers to manipulate from behind the scenes rather than spill blood openly. He must have wanted to use many spies, not just the sage… yet, the only direct attack we received that day came from the sage’s side.

There was only one implication. The only effective means Duke Diarca had utilized to gather information within the Sun Palace that day had been the Sage and other Awakeners.

Even though they had ultimately failed to breach the last line of defense, formed by Nathan, Kanna, and Gakane, they had still gotten through. The Sage must have known this too.

No, could it be that they intentionally chose such a conspicuous method?

The sage had managed to persuade Duke Diarca that day. To do so, he would have naturally offered something of significant value to the Duke.

Yuder pondered what he would have offered in the sage's position.

Ability to penetrate numerous defensive lines and secure the imperial palace with just a few individuals. Also, they returned the favor of monsters with monsters, earning both public fear and acclaim. Plus, they might have offered information that Duke Diarca wasn't aware of until then.

The current Duke Diarca was extremely cautious and didn't prefer direct methods. Other Dukes who opposed him politically had often criticized his approach as cowardly.

However, after the Cavalry gained significant praise for monster subjugation in the west, his recent blatant intrusion using a monster into the Sun Palace earned him unprecedented reviews. Duke Diarca who must have been irritated by the way things had happened in a much more drastic way than he expected, would surely not be ignorant of that fact.

And then, the most crucial piece of informationinformation.

Yuder suspected that the one who offered this ‘help’ was none other than the fake sage from his previous life, Diemon. Although he couldn’t confirm what exactly Diemon had done there, as Kiolle hadn’t seen it himself, that didn’t mean he couldn’t make educated guesses.

Kiolle had clearly told him that after the conversation, Duke Diarca had inquired about the ‘Swordmaster.’

Swordmaster. Why would that term suddenly come up in that context?

That day, the only one who had directly killed the invading monster was Nathan Zuckerman.

Nathan Zuckerman was a hidden Swordmaster. To kill the monster, he had to release a master-level aura.

Kanna and Gakane were the only witnesses, but there was one more entity that knewthe monster that had been slain.

What if that monster was not merely controlled just to be there at that moment? What if, like Emperor Keilusa, who could see and hear through objects, someone had been monitoring through that monster?

And what if the fake sage Diemon was involved in this?

Perhaps Duke Diarca had learned of the presence of an unfamiliar Swordmaster in the Sun Palace that day. Considering he likely knew about the new sword mark on the Emperor’s Sword Mark, would it be so difficult for him to connect the dots?

…It’s nothing less than information about the new Swordmaster, Nathan Zuckerman, who had been hiding his identity all this time. If he had information on him, then surely he can endure some other issues.

Was this speculation too far-fetched? Yuder had a feeling it probably wasn't.

Oblivious, Kiolle kept grumbling at him for more information. Yuder looked at Kiolle's face and spoke.

"Kiolle."

"When the hell are you going to stop calling me like that?"

"Keep an eye on your father from now on."

"What are you talking about?! Are you telling me to be hostile towards my dad?"

Caught off guard, Kiolle became furious. Yuder ignored his reaction and continued speaking.

"From what we've found out, the individual who calls himself a sage specializes in mind manipulation, most likely psychic abilities."

"Mind control? Psychic abilities? Are you saying that guy is manipulating my father?"

"We can't be sure yet. We don't fully understand how he uses his abilities, and given that he's met with Duke Diarca, anything could happen in the future. Just keep an eye on whether Duke Diarca starts behaving differently."

"What, what, what?"

"And you should also be cautious from now on. Don't get too close to them and avoid extended conversations. If I notice even the slightest change in you the next time we meet, I'll put you to sleep for the rest of your life. Just so you know."

"What…?"

This was not just information sharing; it was practically a bombardment. Yuder walked past Kiolle, who stood with wide eyes and an open mouth. Just as Yuder was almost out of the training ground, Kiolle seemed to snap back to reality and shouted after him.

“What the hell are you talking about?! Come back and explain! Are you ignoring me? If you take one more step, you won’t get away with it…!”

‘I’ll have a lot to report when I get back,’ Yuder thought.

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Chapter 588

“According to the information that the assistant has brought, the identity of the intruders in the Sun Palace is as we suspectedthe Star of Nagran,” Kishiar summarized with a calm face.

“Yes.”

“It must have been easy for Duke Diarca to make a secret deal with them behind the Crown Prince’s back. The issue was that they were more conspicuous than expected. However, we gained both in evaluation and information, so there’s no need to be angry.”

“Yes. The sage appears to have already won a good deal of trust from the Crown Prince through healing, and if he can earn the trust of Duke Diarca through this incident, he will have had good reason to take the risk.”

“He must have known that this would deepen the internal strife within the Star of Nagran, yet he proceeded. He must have something he strongly desires. Most likely power, but… We need to watch for signs of brainwashing among those around him, starting with Duke Diarca.”

It was Kishiar, of course. He had perfectly deduced the entire situation from the few words Yuder had provided.

“I think so, too.”

“As for the brainwashing, it seems that it has already begun to some extent, according to the information Kanna brought.”

Kanna had been reading useful information in collaboration with intelligence agents who had collected potential evidence from the house where the Star of Nagran people had stayed. It seemed like

Kanna had discovered something and reported it to Kishiar before Yuder.

“What was the information?”

“The owner of the leather strap that Gakane brought has been confirmed. It is a man named Baron Renbow, who has taken the place of Baron Durmand.”

“So that means…”

“Yes. He’s the liaison between the Star of Nagran and Duke Diarca. He seems to have a decent relationship with the Crown Prince as well. According to the information read from the strap, he has been more than willing to help them out.”

It’s unlikely he’d suddenly become so benevolent. If he was a nobleman loyal to Duke Diarca, the odds were high.

But if the sage had influenced him to act this way, then it was a different story.

‘I need to dig deeper into these people.’

If Kanna had already found that much, she might have also discovered the capabilities of other men near the sage. Yuder opened his mouth as he turned over these thoughts.

“So, it seems that he has learned about Sir Zuckerman’s skills. What are your thoughts on that?”

“You mean the information that Nathan is a Swordmaster.”

Kishiar’s expression remained impassive. There was no sign of surprise or anxiety, even though a long-hidden talent of one of his subordinates had been revealed.

“Well, whether or not he believes the information is a separate matter. After hearing the questions he posed to Kiolle about Theo and Swordmaster following that information, along with the news of the Emperor’s health, he’ll likely be distracted for a while. It’s actually a good turn of events.”

Yuder had also anticipated that Duke Diarca would not fully trust the information given by the sage, but Kishiar’s confidence seemed even deeper.

‘But, Theo?’

“By Theo, are you referring to Theorado Van Tain, the Commander of the Imperial Knights?”

Yuder recalled a past incident when they had quarreled over the use of the training ground. At that time, Kishiar had directed him to Theorado for permission, suggesting they were acquainted.

‘He called him Theo back then too. Are they actually close?’

“We weren’t particularly close. In our younger years, we briefly trained under the same masterHis Majesty, who was the first prince at the time, and myself, in the art of the sword. That’s the extent of our relationship.”

Kishiar responded smoothly, as if he had read Yuder’s thoughts. Yuder stared at him silently for a moment, prompting Kishiar to glance back and ask,

“You seemed curious. Was I mistaken?”

“What does Commander Theorado Van Tain, have to do with a Swordmaster?”

Yuder deflected the question rather than answering it. Kishiar suppressed a light chuckle before responding.

“Well, you probably know to some extent because of your work in the West, but Theo has little interest in anything other than the sword, due to his strong lineage from Tain Duchy. Many believed that if a new Swordmaster were to appear in the Empire, it would be him.”

That’s why there had been so much speculation that the recent “New mark on the Emperor’s Sword Mark” left by Kishiar might actually have been the work of Theorado Van Tain. Despite his denial, the suspicions persisted.

“Perhaps Duke Diarca hasn’t let go of that idea yet. Upon hearing that Nathan is a Swordmaster, the first person he inquired about was Theo. He probably suspects that the information was intentionally altered to hide the fact that it was actually Theo, not Nathan, there.”

‘Indeed, if someone hears that an adjutant who had been quietly serving Duke Peletta for decades suddenly has the skills of a Swordmaster, they would naturally suspect the information is altered.’

However, it was absurd to think that the next person Duke Diarca asked about was Kiolle’s likelihood of being a Swordmaster. That question alone was an insult to all Swordmasters in the world.

“Anyway, we have a good understanding of Duke Diarca’s current mindset, so there should be no issues in dealing with him moving forward. Good work.”

Normally, Yuder would have left to attend to the next matter at hand, but today was different. He had additional information he wanted to share with the one man who knew his secret.

“Commander, there’s one more piece of information I’d like to share.”

“Judging by your expression, it’s not something Kiolle provided. Is it related to the ‘previous game’?”

“Yes.”

Yuder looked down at the tactical board that had been neatly placed on the corner of Kishiar’s desk. Since that day, the board had never left Kishiar’s workspace.

As he traced the lines drawn on the board with his eyes, Yuder slowly began to speak.

“This is not the first time I’ve heard the name the Star of Nagran.”

“You seemed to know little about them. The situation must have been quite different before?”

“Different, yet similar.”

In his previous life, the Star of Nagran had also split from within and perished in internal strife. However, back then, Yuder had only learned about them after everything had already ended.

Yuder briefly described the events of that time.

“There was a dangerous group gathering Awakeners to attack the nobles and royals of various countries. They had the same name as now, but back then they fell apart due to internal strife before they could execute their plans.”

Their base near the southern desert had been completely devastated, and they had since vanished entirely.

“A few years later, another group appeared with the same name.”

Yuder recounted the story of the false sage who had enchanted many but ultimately met his end at Yuder’s hands.

“I had information linking that false sage to the previously disappeared Star of Nagran. And indeed, I saw him among those who recently arrived in the capital alongside the sage.”

“Internal strife, ruin, and now a second sage.”

Kishiar’s fingers tapped slowly on the armrest of his chair.

“Among them, it seems the internal strife is proceeding similarly to before, leaving the rest of the seeds yet to blossom.”

“Yes. Many circumstances have changed, but their internal discord remains the same.”

“That’s inevitable. If the current sage was moving with similar intentions as before, then someone like Nahan who despises the nobility and the non-Awakeners would have judged that they can’t walk the same path.”

Indeed, the internal strife was already happening in the capital. It was not far-fetched to think that the same events as before would occur again.

“Before such events repeat themselves, I wish to stop everything.”

Both the current sage and the internal strife were of course individuals that the Cavalry must be cautious of. However, the person who concerned Yuder the most at this moment was the fake sage, Diemon, who had ruined many things like an unseen storm in his previous life.

Upon hearing that, Kishiar paused his tapping on the armrest.

“Initially, I had thought of letting the sage’s actions be, assuming they would contribute to the chaos in Diarca. But if the entity my

assistant is guarding against becomes an even greater threat later, then we must also change our strategy.”

“What do you suggest?”

“Although the sage and Nahan appear to have different goals, I believe their underlying purpose is the same. They both aim to serve the group of Awakeners called the Star of Nagran.”

That was true. Both the sage and Nahan acted with the goal of serving the Star of Nagran in mind. This was a fact that could be easily ascertained from the words of the Awakeners affiliated with the Star of Nagran.

“Without the support of their affiliates, no cause can wield any power. A cause gives birth to influence, and influence in turn gives power. What would happen if a third party appeared and offered those within the Star of Nagran a new and safe path?”

“…”

At that moment, a bright light sparked in Yuder’s mind.

This was directly related to what the Cavalry was striving to accomplish.

“…You mean offering them new job opportunities, money, and a life of freedom?”

“Exactly. If they no longer have to live in hiding and are provided with money and freedom, I’m really curious what choices those who’ve had only two options will make.”

If the existing causes were to disappear, then all actions taken thus far would lose their power. While neither the sage nor Nahan would easily give up their plans, all that would be left after the causes vanished would be their transparent desires.

Kishiar flashed a warm smile.

Yuder felt the corners of his lips rise involuntarily.

“Many from the western branch and those residing here from the Star of Nagran will have much to contribute in this recruitment.”

Finally, the second recruitment for the Cavalry officially began.

The moment news spread that all regional administrative offices of the Empire were accepting recruitment applications, people began to line up in droves.

“Move! I was here first!”

“What are you talking about? I’ve been here since dawn!”

“Hey, let’s be friendly. We’re going to be comrades if we pass.”

The fervor for the application was even more intense than initially anticipated. Even the complacent administrators and provincial nobility were taken aback.

Physical transformation Awakeners, who usually lived in hiding, emerged after a long time. Many parents who had children awakened at a young age also came to apply.

And peculiarly, although they were a minority, even perfectly healthy nobles began to apply.

The reason was simple. Revlin Shand Apeto and Pruelle Van Tain, who had been a temporary member until now, had shocked the aristocratic world once again by being the first to line up and submit their application for full-time membership. Inspired by them, some young nobles who had been hiding their awakened abilities began to apply as well.

The Cavalry dispatched first-round members to various regions to sort the applications. Those who had lied about being an Awakener or those with ill intentions were eliminated like the receding tide in the first round.

Those who passed were gathered at a designated location for the second round of tests. This time, the first-round dispatched members met each applicant in person to test their abilities and conduct interviews to judge their suitability. Those who seemed unfit for life as a member, but still wished to work as an Awakener, were earmarked for future employment in new branches.

“So, theyre hiring and paying people even before a branch exists? Does that make sense?”

“The Duke of Peletta and His Majesty are generously supporting it. They’re even providing accommodations for those without homes.”

“Is that really true?”

As rumors spread, more and more people flocked to apply, making the work of the first-round members increasingly difficult. Despite their relentless effort day and night, their faces were full of joy as they sent their reports back to the capital.

At the same time, in the western branch of the Cavalry, the first branch to be created, Marty and Robel, who had become rumored as a happily awakened couple, were having a conversation.

“Robel, weve received a letter from the south. Stop what you’re doing and come read it.”

“Got it!”

Dropping the load he was carrying, Robel rushed in and hastily opened the letter. A complex smile formed on his face as he read it. Noticing the expression, Marty asked with a concerned look.

“What does it say? Its a letter from the Star of Nagran, right?”

“Yes. It seems they couldnt believe the details I sent last time. Now that the second recruitment phase has started in the south, they finally seem ready to believe. They’re asking for more details.”

The letter had come from a colleague who had moved to a southern base from their old western base. Robel had spent months secretly trying to establish a line of communication with other members of the Star of Nagran. They trusted each other enough not to reveal Robels new role in the Cavalry.

The letter discussed how many people from the western base were struggling to adapt to life in the south, how they didn’t want to live this way forever, and how they all wanted to achieve freedom, if possible.

This implied that, although they couldnt entirely let their guard down about Robel leaving the Star of Nagran, the internal situation was becoming so tense that they couldn’t ignore it.

“Everything is happening just as the Commander predicted,” Marty, who had recently learned to read, murmured as he looked at the letter.

“Yes. According to him, there seems to be a fair number of people inside who are willing to leave if given the opportunity. Itd be good if we could help.”

Without hesitation, Robel quickly wrote a reply and headed toward Emun Philang, the respectable official branch leader of the western branch.

Emun, who had been busily reviewing applications, broke into a tired but genuine smile.

“This should be sufficient to send now. I’ll share the news with the members in the south as well. Thank both of you.”

“Its nothing. Its what we should be doing.”

“The Commander and Yuder will be grateful too.”

At that, Robel and Marty exchanged awkward smiles.

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Chapter 589

While the branch members in the west were diligently working on the second wave of recruitment, the capital was anything but idle. Those who had witnessed the activities of the Cavalry up close were more enthusiastic about the recruitment than any other region.

Moreover, people were flocking from all over, including the relatively close Central regions, making every member busy beyond measure.

“Wait, this person is from the North. Why did they apply here? Did they send their documents to the wrong place?”

“They say they dont want to live there anymore. They think applying in the capital, where the Cavalry headquarters is located, is more fair and trustworthy. We can’t force someone who has lost their hometown loyalty to go back.”

“Ah I see. That makes sense, I suppose.”

“It’s not just one or two people like this. I even heard that someone from another country inquired about joining yesterday.”

“Really, from another country?”

Amidst the members who couldn’t hide their surprise, Gayle and Doyle roamed around. While the busy members paid no attention to them, the brothers found this rather favorable. They were in high spirits, particularly now that they were given responsibilities similar to the others.

“Hosanna, we’re here.”

The brothers entered the room where Hosanna was staying, their faces flushed with excitement. Hosanna, who was sitting on the bed knitting, looked up. Beside him was Priest Lusan, who was also holding knitting needles and stood up as he noticed the brothers.

“Oh, your friends have arrived. How time flies. I will take my leave now.”

“Yes.”

“I will practice the knit and purl stitches you taught me today.”

The Priest, with a basket of yarn and needles hanging from his side, left the room, his eyes sparkling. As soon as the door closed, Gayle and Doyle immediately asked,

“Hosanna, were you teaching him how to knit?”

“What’s going on? You must be getting better if you can knit now.”

Hosanna, the once frail young man from the South, looked much improved after receiving treatment from Lusan and Enon. Although he still couldn’t walk on his own, his condition had improved enough for him to move around the room.

Yet, his awakened abilities had not returned. He tried to use his power about once a day but felt almost nothing. Knowing this, neither Gayle nor Doyle asked if his power had returned.

“There’s nothing much to say He asked what I used to do to pass the time in winter, and when I said I knitted, he brought some yarn and asked me to teach him. That’s all.”

“Really? We’ve never seen you knit. When did you do all that?”

Hosanna fell silent for a moment at Gayle’s question, then spoke.

“Before. Before I came to the stronghold.”

“Oh, right before that time.”

Before the stronghold meant before becoming a Star of Nagran. Only then did the brothers understand Hosannas complicated expression and scratched their heads.

“Hmm, Hosanna. Do you know why it’s been so noisy outside lately?”

“I heard theyre recruiting new members for the Cavalry.”

“Exactly, and that’s why we’re helping out this time.”

“You guys?”

Caught off guard, Hosannas response was a beat slower than usual.

“How are you going to help when you’re not even members?”

“You mean we’re not just grunts, so there’s more we can do? I’ve heard there’s a surprising amount of heavy lifting involved. The assistant to the leader of that scary Cavalry asked us to help with the practical exam if possible. I guess it’s a bit difficult to hire someone whose skills aren’t as good as ours. Hehe.

The brothers chattered on, brimming with anticipation about the Cavalry recruitment. Their faces glowed like those of ordinary young men as they spoke about how many people had already gathered and how lively the atmosphere within the Cavalry was.

‘Gayle and Doyle… Who knew they could wear such expressions?’

Hosanna looked at them, feeling their faces had become strangely unfamiliar, and slightly bit his lip.

‘But it doesnt make sense. The Cavalry knows better than anyone that those two are the Stars of Nagran. Yet they asked for help in recruitment Does this mean theyre planning something else?’

His sharply darting thoughts gradually lost momentum and halted. Hosanna glanced down at the tangled bundle of thread he had been fiddling with. The person who brought the thread couldn’t have known, but it was the warm white color he had once loved.

To be honest, since waking up in the Cavalry, Hosanna had not experienced the kind of dangerous and painful events he had anticipated. When it was time, wholesome meals were served. A gruff but somehow insightful pharmacist and a priest with a cat-like countenance appeared, aiding his treatment and rehabilitation.

The closest thing to an interrogation he had was the times he met a short-haired woman named Kanna. Hosanna had serious doubts about whether she viewed their discussion time as a legitimate opportunity to slack off. Kanna spent much more time asking about his daily life and past than about the Star of Nagran. Even when he remained silent, she often rambled on before departing.

Once, he had responded, “Persuading me like this is pointless. I will never speak ill of my lord. Using me to lure him is futile, so stop this nonsense.” At that, Kanna burst into laughter, confusing Hosanna.

Her cheerful reply was, “I get it. If you don’t want to talk, then don’t. When have I ever forced you to speak?”

And of course… she never had.

Kanna spoke softly, her bright blue eyes seeming to understand Hosanna’s confusion.

“You already know your sins better than anyone else. You just can’t let go, that’s all. Well, knowing that is knowing everything, isn’t

it?”

The people here, while pressuring him for nothing, seemed to know everything about him. Even without speaking, it felt like they already knew the answers. While that was terrifying, something heavy that had always weighed on his heart seemed to lighten.

He started to cut back on his anxious efforts to regain his powers, from repeated attempts to just once a day. Ironically, he felt better now, unable to use any abilities at all.

Continuing to watch Gayle and Doyle excitedly discussing future plans, Hosanna impulsively spoke up.

“So, you two have really decided to stay here for the long term?”

“Yeah? Yep, that’s right.”

Doyle responded.

“But it’s not just us. I heard some people captured in the west are also helping out in that branch, and some who were imprisoned are participating in city reconstruction.”

“…People captured in the west? Is that true? They weren’t executed?”

This was news to him, startling enough to question his own ears. At Hosanna’s surprised query, Gayle nodded.

“So, the Cavalry leader said… what was it? He would give us a chance to understand what we’ve done wrong or something like that? Anyway, that’s what he said. We were both surprised.”

“A chance to understand what we’ve done wrong…”

Hosanna repeated the words, his lips trembling. He thought that maybe, just maybe, those words had a meaning similar to what

Kanna had once told him.

“But that’s not all, Hosanna. Some of the people here who haven’t committed any crimes have signed proper contracts with the Cavalry, getting paid for work. We’ve decided to do the same this time.”

“A contract?”

“Yes.”

The brothers excitedly explained the contract. According to them, the Cavalry had originally offered them the chance to join as members. However, they had declined the offer, choosing instead to remain employed within the headquarters as they had been.

“A chance to become members… Do you really believe that?”

“Why wouldn’t we? We’ve paid for our mistakes.”

“But still… isn’t it better to be a member than an employee?”

“No, we don’t want that.”

Unexpectedly, the brothers shook their heads, their faces stern and resolute.

“You don’t understand the harshness of the training here because you haven’t seen it. I’ve never seen people train so hard in my life. Even if you beat me to death, I won’t do it!”

“…What?”

“I prefer to work in the way we have been, doing regular jobs. They even teach us to read and write here. We’ve already signed a contract that includes a house.”

“Yeah, yeah, it’s a new house in the Seventh Wall District. We didn’t know much about housing contracts, but people helped us out. It’s a bit small, but it gets plenty of sunlight. There’s even a tiny garden…”

“We’ll grow vegetables there. Pumpkins, carrots, lettuce. There’ll be more than enough for the two of us, so we can share some with you, Hosanna. Come visit us.”

“…”

Did they really think that Hosanna could just leisurely visit their home? The conversation felt so surreal that he was momentarily stunned.

“Oh, by the way, Hosanna. We were told it’s okay to tell you this… You remember when the assistant to the leader mentioned that people who might be from the Star of Nagran have been spotted in the capital recently?”

“…Yes. What about it?”

“They’ve found where those people are staying. And from what we’ve heard, it seems they’re people we know.”

For a moment, Hosanna’s eyes widened.

“When the assistant asked if we’d like to help with this, he mentioned that if we recognize anyone, we should tell them. He described their appearances and abilities a bit, and… it’s pretty certain that Nezo and Langbarton are there.”

“Nezo and Langbarton? They wouldn’t have come this far without the sage.”

“Exactly. Ah, but there was also someone middle-aged among them.”

Doyle hesitated, watching Hosanna's reaction.

"…The sage is in the capital? Now?"

"There can't be many people of that age other than him, but it could also be someone else. You never know, it could be someone like Diemon who has acquired shapeshifting abilities and is masquerading as an older man."

"Was there anyone… anyone who looked like Nahan?"

Hosanna's voice trembled. The brothers shook their heads.

"If that guy was there, he would have asked you first, not us."

"Right, I see… But I still can't believe the sage would come here. He's not the type to frequent places like this. If he really did come, wouldn't he have come to save us…? No, but why is he here and not in the west when Nahan hasn't even returned yet?"

Hosanna's voice wavered in confusion before becoming softer.

"We don't really know either. But it's what the leader's assistant said, so it's probably not a lie. He might even come to ask you soon, so don't be too shocked."

The three of them simultaneously thought of a man with dark hair and eyes, one so cold that just approaching him felt like the onset of winter. Yuder Aile appeared before them only in crucial moments.

And for Hosanna, that man had once directly saved his life.

Even after his brothers had left, Hosanna stared at his knitting needle for a long time.

'What's happened to Lord Nahan? Should I really be doing this…?'

No matter how much he pondered, his thoughts inevitably converged to a single point: a faint envy for his brothers who now dreamt and laughed about a normal future.

What would it have been like if he and Nahan could have originally come to such a place?

Nahan would have coldly scoffed at such an impossible thought. But for Hosanna, whether it was on the Star of Nagran or with the Cavalry, all that mattered was a place of safety. Even the beliefs loudly proclaimed by his master, Nahan, weren't all that important to him.

All that mattered were Nahan's life and safety, and his own guilt.

'Lord Nahan couldn't have passed away so effortlessly. He must have left the moment he found out I failed my mission. Given my limitations now, I can be of no help to him. There's nothing I can do.'

Hosanna laid down, pressing a hand lightly against his constricted chest.

Just then, a knock on the door echoed as someone entered the room. Hosanna, opening his eyes that had been shut, was startled to see the two men who had stepped in.

"Good, you're awake. That's fortunate."

A man, beautiful as if an avatar of the sun god, sat beside his bed, his expression unreadable as he smiled. Behind him stood not Yuder Aile with his usual dark hair, but a southern knight.

The moment Hosanna saw the knight's face, his body involuntarily trembled. How could he not recognize him?

It was the very knight who had singlehandedly shattered all of Nahan and Hosanna's plansNathan Zuckerman.

“I heard you’ve been improving lately. Do you think we could talk for a moment?”

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Chapter 590

“I heard your condition has improved lately. Can we talk for a moment?”

Hosanna had struggled to calm his rapid breathing and had nodded.

Since his arrival, Commander Kishiar of the Cavalry unit had never directly interrogated him. Hosanna assumed it was because he was deemed of little value, which ironically gave him some relief.

But why had the Commander come now, especially when he was accompanied by a knight?

The only reason the Commander might have come to see him at this hour was… had they discovered Nahan? If not, the only other thing that came to mind was the story Gayle and Doyle had shared earlier.

His heart raced wildly.

“You look like you’ll faint before we even start our conversation. Perhaps you should have some tea first. Nathan, prepare the tea.”

“Yes.”

“No, no, no, that’s not necessary…”

Without daring to look directly at Nathan, Hosanna quickly responded.

“I don’t need it.”

The idea of drinking tea seemed more terrifying than talking to the Commander. He was certain that if he took even a sip of the tea the knight offered, he'd be plagued by nightmares for days.

Kishiar, after observing Hosanna's desperate voice and pale face for a moment, tilted his head and canceled the order for tea. Only then did Hosanna feel a bit relieved. However, he couldn't escape Kishiar's gaze.

"…"

"…"

In the silence, Kishiar simply stared at the trembling Hosanna. After a while, Hosanna hesitantly looked up at the man who didn't speak. And in front of those piercing eyes, he momentarily lost himself.

"Ah…"

It was his first time seeing Commander Kishiar up close. He was so terrified that he didn't expect to notice anyone's appearance, but the face before him was so captivating that he couldn't think of anything else.

The relaxed posture, the elegantly folded hands over his lap.

The Commander's gaze, which he had expected to be intimidating, was surprisingly gentle and calm. He looked as if he would patiently wait forever for the person in front of him to calm down.

The deep red eyes that stared softly at him.

Strangely, his mind felt hazy, and his trembling subsided.

Lost in his thoughts, Hosanna was brought back to reality when he noticed the Commander suddenly narrowing his eyes. Panic struck him.

What have I done… How dare I stare directly at the Commander?

Seeing Hosanna's confusion, Kishiar chuckled and asked, "Did you enjoy the view?"

"I… I didn't…"

"Well, I've been handsome since birth, so I'm used to such reactions. Even my assistant once admitted that my only strong point is my good looks."

"…"

"It's rare for him to admit anything easily, but he said that without hesitation. Isn't that cute? So, it's not strange for you to be so captivated."

What was happening? Hosanna's mind was a whirlwind.

He was still scared, but the words he heard were so refined, yet the content was odd and frivolous, making it all feel bizarre.

Who was calling whom cute? Did he mishear? Seeing the confusion in Hosanna's eyes, the man continued with a mischievous smile.

"In moments like these, don't you think the listener should join in? Singing my own praises feels a tad awkward, even for me."

"Uh Ah"

Hosanna barely mumbled a response, then closed his mouth. He couldn't believe that the man unabashedly bragging about his good

looks was the same fearsome Commander of the Cavalry, a Duke from the imperial family no less.

‘I’ve never heard that the Commander of the Cavalry had such a personality’

“Now, do you have any idea why I’m here?” the man inquired, addressing the bewildered Hosanna.

“I assume it might have something to do with Nahan”

“True, he has recently appeared in the capital. But that’s not why I’m here.”

“What?”

Hosanna perked up. Although Kishiar had said, ‘that’s not why I’m here,’ all Hosanna heard was that first part.

My God. Nahan was alive. And if he had come to the capital, he must have been well enough for long-distance travel. A warm sensation gathered at the corners of Hosanna’s eyes, and he bit his lip.

“Nahan is in the capital? Is this true?”

“The fact that he’s alive has already been confirmed, so it’s not surprising. What’s important is why he would give up fleeing and come all the way here.”

For a moment, thoughts of past conversations with Gayle and Doyle flashed through Hosanna’s mind.

Awakeners from the Star of Nagran recently sighted in the capital.

The sages close associates, and a mysterious figure believed to be the sage himself.

If the sage were really here, it wouldn’t be strange for Nahan to follow. But whether the mission was a benign one, Hosanna couldn’t be sure.

”’

“You may have already heard, but Awakeners from the Star of Nagran are quite active in the capital lately, even earning a reputation as the Crown Prince’s healers. Among them appears to be the one you call the sage. And not long after their appearance, Nahan arrived. It’s reasonable to assume a connection.”

“Don’t you agree?” said the Commander of the Cavalry, smiling.

‘The sage as the Crown Princes healer…?’

For a moment, Hosanna felt dizzy.

He knew that the sage had started establishing some sort of connection with the higher-ups to protect the Star of Nagran. Indeed, thanks to that connection, Nahan had been able to rescue other Awakeners imprisoned by the Apeto Duke family.

Back then, Nahan accepted the help because the sage assured, “This is just one of the secret means to protect the Star of Nagran. None of those nobles know our true identity, and I have no plans to deepen the connection any further.”

But did the sage really cut off that connection afterward?

Hosanna remembered the time when someone close to the Crown Prince had sought them out to cure his headache. Ostensibly, it was about headache relief, but in reality, it was a risky maneuver to test them for treating the reclusive Crown Prince.

Back then, what had Nahan, who managed to escape from that situation, asked Hosanna?

‘Hosanna, what do you think the sage would say about the Crown Prince?’

And what had Hosanna replied?

‘He is a good man; he wont put us in such risky situations again. At least I hope so.’

‘Yes, we can only hope so.’

At the time, he had merely thought the words to be a bit odd and hadn’t taken them seriously. Why would he care what the Crown Prince or the nobles had in mind? He had no intention of getting further involved with them.

However, after his and Nahan’s disappearance and the sage making a point to come all the way to the capital, he had to reconsider. If the sage was truly building a reputation among the nobility as a healer, then the only reasonable explanation had to be related to the events back then.

Nahans abilities were not primarily intended for healing either. So, surely, the sage and his followers could mimic something similar.

Am I overthinking this? But if my suspicions are correct… and if Nahan found out about it after arriving at the southern base

Nahan knew about it, he would certainly confront the Sage directly to confirm his intentions, regardless of how many soldiers were on the lookout to arrest him in the capital.

Although it seemed that Nahan would follow whatever the sage said, Hosanna knew there were standards he held. He differed slightly from others who were simply charmed by the sage’s humanity. Nahan had always been faithful to the cause of the Star of Nagran and its Awakeners.

He had a goal and a dream: to save his comrades through his own strength, without begging for mercy or pretending to the corrupt powers that be.

This had been a promise since they first met the sage in the desert and jointly adopted the name of the Star of Nagran.

But what if Nahan were to conclude that the promise had been broken?

If the sage did not refute this or failed to persuade Nahan as before…

“Every Awakener from the Star of Nagran we’ve encountered has consistently spoken of discord between Nahan and the sage. We already know how much Nahan despises the nobility. I highly doubt he would travel all this way to aid the sage, who has now become the healer for the Crown Prince,” Kishiar spoke slowly, making his throat go dry. No matter how much he swallowed, it felt like he had swallowed a needle.

“Who do you think would win?”

“What are you talking about?”

“If Nahan and the sage were to fight, who would come out on top?”

Hosanna’s shoulders, which had been moving up and down, came to a sudden halt.

“What a strange thing to say. The sage has always looked after and protected us. While it’s true that Nahan can be a bit brusque… He too acts for the sake of our people. Such an event is impossible.”

“Are you certain?”

“…”

“Then why has no one come to find you and your captured comrades after the incident in the west?”

“That’s because…!”

“Don’t tell me it’s because the Cavalry is fearsome. That’s not an answer in this situation.”

Hosanna’s lips trembled; his head felt like it was about to burst.

“I don’t know anything. I can’t say anything.”

“Hosanna, if I were you, I’d think more deeply about protecting what’s important, rather than claiming ignorance. How good do you think the situation is for you now, given that you can’t even walk? Even we in the Cavalry know how much Nahan despises the nobility. Do you think the sage, who has now sided with them, would be merciful to him?”

Hosanna wanted to block his ears from Kishiar’s soft-spoken words. But his hands wouldn’t move.

“It’s truly odd. You don’t even believe the situation will be peacefully resolved, yet you fail to notice the contradiction.”

“I… I should go…”

And there it was, the piercing discomfort of an unresolved dilemma, hanging heavily in the air.

The inside of his eyes burned as if inflamed. Even as Hosanna gasped and mumbled, Kishiar maintained his tranquil voice and posed a question.

“Now, may I ask you something at this point?”

“…”

“Ever since I learned about this matter, I’ve instructed my men to ask a particular question to all the Awakeners from the Star of Nagran that we are protecting. Strangely enough, no one has been able to give a proper answer. Or rather, it seems like they didn’t even hear the question in the first place.”

But this time, he hoped it would be different. That’s why he had come. With those thoughts, the man opened his perfectly formed lips and asked again.

“…”

“Do you remember what the sage’s power is?”

For a moment, all sound seemed to stop.

He definitely heard something, but he couldn’t quite grasp it. It was like the wind, entering one ear and exiting the other.

However, moments later, Nathan Zuckerman appeared in Hosanna’s field of vision. Realizing that the southern knight was looking at him with a stoic expression, a sudden surge of fear pierced through the dusty air filling Hosanna’s mind. Within that eerie sensation, he faintly recalled the words he had just heard.

Fear, oddly enough, cleared his mind. It was a very strange feeling.

“Ah”

Hosanna hunched over, clutching his head. Shivering for no discernible reason, he opened his mouth.

“The sage, the sage’s power, you say? That is… I… I…”

He knew. It was something everyone on the Star of Nagran knew very naturally.

But he strangely couldn’t speak it. As if he had forgotten all the words that could describe it. It was as if he only now realized that an unseen hand had been muffling his mouth.

‘What on Earth is this…’

“As expected, you can’t answer.”

Kishiar murmured quietly.

“If you ever become able to answer this question, we’ll meet again.”

He rose from his seat. The shadow of his towering figure cast over the bed.

Hosanna remained huddled in place, dazed, as he heard the door close behind him.

“To break a mind-shaking power, one needs a mind-shaking chaos,” Kishiar said as he exited Hosanna’s room, moving forward.

“Judging by the fact he could barely comprehend my question, it seems like it’s having some effect, Nathan.”

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Chapter 591

“To break a mind-shaking power, one needs a mind-shaking chaos,” Kishiar said as he exited Hosanna’s room, moving forward.

“Judging by the fact he could barely comprehend my question, it seems like it’s having some effect, Nathan.”

Today’s visit to Hosanna by the Gayle and Doyle brothers, who talked about the sage and his associates, and Kishiar’s subsequent visit accompanied by Nathan Zuckerman was by no means a coincidence. Multiple stages of groundwork had been laid.

First, Yuder met Gayle and Doyle, subtly leaking information about the sage while requesting help with the second recruitment of Cavalry. The brothers immediately conveyed this information to Hosanna, who felt disquieted upon hearing it. Because he had been exceptionally stable in the recent days, this emotional disturbance had a broader and more intense scope than usual.

To add fuel to the fire, Kishiar appeared with Nathan Zuckerman, who was the object of Hosanna’s fear. The change in Hosanna’s emotions took a wild turn, more so than ever. Bringing intermittent unrelated topics into their conversation was all part of a scheme to shake Hosanna’s mind.

By making him experience emotional extremes, Hosanna finally showed some signs of breaking free from his mental conditioning. Even recognizing a question for the first time was a significant effect.

“I thought it wouldn’t help when Baron Aile summoned me, but I’m glad it did,” Nathan said.

“Nothing is more terrifying than a surefire belief failing. I hope next time we can have a more meaningful conversation,” Kishiar

responded as he climbed the stairs. Suddenly, he stopped. Nathan turned his head toward where Kishiar's gaze had landed. A man stood there, as still as a dark shadow.

Standing before them, waiting near the office, Yuder Aile quietly spoke, "Did it go well?"

"Yes, he finally understood the question about the sage's ability. As you suggested, seeing Nathan's face had a good effect."

"I'm glad."

Although his tone could suggest unfortunate news as much as good, Kishiar seemed to take it as the best compliment and smiled warmly.

"Were you worried enough to wait here until I arrived?"

"You never know."

Yuder didn't deny it. Anyone else might have found the answer arrogantly presumptuous, but when he said it, it felt utterly appropriate given his unique aura.

"Was Adjutant Zuckerman also alright?"

"Yes."

"Nathan did nothing, so of course he was fine," Kishiar answered for him, lifting his hand in a slight gesture.

"Shall we go inside to talk now? Nathan, your tasks for today are complete; you can proceed with the next one."

"Yes."

Though Kishiar said 'next task,' his intent to speak privately with Yuder was painfully evident, so Nathan simply nodded, playing

ignorant. Ever since Yuder had quickly rejuvenated Kishiar's condition not long ago, Nathan had come to take such matters more lightly.

"Since today's tasks are over and you're going on to the next, are you going to see Gakane now?"

Yuder blinked and asked.

"Yes."

"Understood. I appreciate your assistance."

When Yuder began making plans related to Hosanna, he made a single request to Kishiar and Nathan Zuckerman. He asked if Gakane Bolunwald could learn swordsmanship from Nathan.

Kishiar said he would permit it if Nathan was amenable, and after some consideration, Nathan agreed to try it out, albeit for a limited time. Essentially, his agreement was almost akin to repaying a debt he owed to Yuder.

Thus commenced the swordsmanship training, which naturally was a secret that could not be disclosed to anyone. There was scarcely any time to meet, so the lessons had to be squeezed into brief moments of leisure after each of them finished their daily tasks.

Despite receiving only minimal guidance and being burdened with enormous tasks, Gakane managed to fulfill them all. It was proof enough that his request hadn't been made lightly.

It was never too late to learn the art of the sword. With the right aptitude and tenacity, the rest was simply a matter of guidance. Gakane Bolunwald definitely had these qualities.

Underlying it all was a wellspring of pent-up frustration, born from a long-standing yearning. It evoked emotions in Nathan that took him

back to his own early days of learning the sword.

So he concluded that if Gakane could last for more than a month, it would be alright to spend a bit more time and teach him properly. Of course, this thought was kept a secret, even from Gakane, Yuder, and Lord Kishiar.

“I haven’t been able to properly observe Gakane since I entrusted his training to him. I was wondering how he’s progressing. It’s good to hear it’s going well,” Yuder said.

“As far as I can tell, Nathan hasn’t complained. I assume the boy has some potential, so there’s no need for concern,” Kishiar lightly responded as they entered his office.

The appearance of the office they walked into was somewhat different from usual. Papers were piled high, overflowing from the desk to the floor, sofa, and tables.

Both men, aware that these were applications from prospective second-batch members, maintained impassive expressions. Yuder naturally navigated through the papers and asked Kishiar another question.

“Did Hosanna respond to your inquiry?”

“No. But I’m quite certain he’s aware; he’s just unable to respond,” Kishiar said.

“Ah, I see.”

Thanks to the efforts of Kanna and Emun in the West, Yuder had gleaned some information about the sage from the Awakeners who had belonged to the Star of Nagran. This allowed him to make certain speculations about the sage’s abilities.

First, those from the Star of Nagran invariably saw the sage as a good person, without a hint of malice. This belief was so deeply ingrained that it would not change under any contradictory circumstances.

Second, even though they must have observed and experienced the sage's abilities directly, they appeared unable to recall the specifics. When questioned about it, they conveniently glossed over, as though such matters never existed in their world.

Third, these traits persisted long after their initial meeting with the sage.

From these observations, Yuder speculated that the sage's ability might involve some form of mental manipulation, triggered by a single word or a brief piece of information.

'Perhaps what he implanted in those from the Star of Nagran was a simple notion: that the sage is an entity to be trusted unconditionally,' Yuder thought.

From his experiences in a previous life, he knew that mind-controlling or brainwashing abilities were less effective the more complex the implanted command. Even the smallest deviation in behavior could quickly break the spell.

Controlling someone in such detail would require constant attention, and even then it might not be enough. To brainwash a large number of people simultaneously, one could only implant a proposition or two in their minds. Even so, the effect lasting this long is truly remarkable

Upon hearing Yuder's speculation, Kishiar offered a new perspective. He suggested that perhaps the duration of the brainwashing effect was continually renewed for those who spent time with the affected individuals.

People serving heretics do the same; it's harder to break away from a group when you share the same beliefs.

It made sense then why the Gayle and Doyle brothers, who were always together, or the many Awakeners in the West, couldn't break away from the Sage despite the passage of time. That's why they had targeted Hosanna as their first objective.

Hosanna was an unusual case; brainwashed by the sage, yet valuing Nahan more than the sage. He occasionally met with Gayle and Doyle, but spent most of his time alone. He was considered the most likely to waver.

And the results obtained today seemed to confirm that assessment.

He was worried that the brothers might not disclose the information properly, so it was worthwhile to secretly leave permission that they could pass it on to Hosanna in advance.

Once we add the information about the sage's past that Kanna and Enon will bring, we'll quickly uncover his power and neutralizing methods.

Such powers were troublesome, as killing the caster didn't necessarily end them. Yuder had learned from past experiences that some people's faith grew stronger if the person they believed in died.

One failure was enough. Even if it was troublesome, the proper course was to methodically find the neutralizing methods, choke their powers, and make them reveal themselves.

"According to Emun's report, a significant number of the Star of Nagran members are interested in the second recruitment of the Cavalry," said Kishiar.

"It seems things are progressing well on that end too."

“True. I was a bit concerned about the Southern merchants who claimed to have made contact with their base in the South, but that’s still uncertain. In any case, it’s not a significant variable at the moment.”

This useful information came from a letter Gakane had found in the sage’s residence.

It was ridiculous that they survived and made substantial contact with the Star of Nagrans, but there was no significant concern as the second Cavalry recruitment had begun and was shaking the internal structure of the Star of Nagrans.

All things considered, everything is rolling along quite well.

Yuder, who had calmly assessed the situation surrounding the Cavalry, turned his gaze toward a tactical game board placed amid a pile of documents. No pieces were visible on the board, which as always was simply left vacant.

Placing that board there without actually playing the game… is that a sign hes not forgetting what happened that day?

Kishiar hadn’t changed noticeably since hearing the story of the past. He was still, if not more so, efficiently going about all tasks without a single mistake.

It seemed like he no longer had nightmares about when Yuder died, and there were no immediate issues at hand. Yet for some reason, that pristine tactical game board, which never disappeared from the cluttered desk, bothered Yuder more than usual today.

Just as he was about to say something, Kishiar spoke first.

“By the way, I received a message earlier. His Majesty will be able to come tomorrow.”

“Tomorrow, you say?”

“Yes. I should go about my daily life as usual, so I won’t be coming out to greet our ‘unimportant guest’. I’ll leave the reception to my assistant. Take good care of it.”

This meant that Emperor Keilusa, who had decided to receive ability training from Yuder, would be making a covert visit to the Cavalry tomorrow. After a few days of seeming quietude for coordination, it appeared that the schedule had finally been settled.

Yuder nodded in acknowledgment. Faced with the Emperor’s secret visit and the crucial task of training, any trivial questions were promptly pushed aside.

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Chapter 592

A new day had dawned.

Before the Cavalry headquarters, carriages laden with stacks of applications had lined up, even before the morning sun had risen. The shouts of members who had rushed out without even washing their faces filled the training ground, echoing behind laborers busily moving boxes of applications.

Despite winter, robust cries unabatedly filled the air, accompanied by sporadic small explosions. The scene flowed like interlocking gears, brimming with energy.

Two men sat in a carriage at the end of the line, watching the bustling spectacle. A young man adorned in a luxurious hat and coat, wearing glasses, sat beside an elderly man serving him respectfully. Though they appeared to be just another noble and his dignified butler, they were, in fact, Emperor Keilusa La Orr and his chief attendant Yuliver. Both had disguised their appearances through magic artifacts.

“The line of carriages ahead doesn’t seem to be moving fast. I hope you’re not too bored,” said Yuliver.

“It’s fine. Watching the training is more interesting than I thought. The atmosphere is a bit too intense, though,” the Emperor responded.

The scene beyond the metal fence of the training ground was indeed ferocious. Two teams were engaged in a game, vying for control of a single red ball. The intense struggle more closely resembled a brawl than a training exercise, as men covered in dirt and grime flew at each other with a vengeance.

One of the members managed to snatch the red ball and began to run like a wild beast on all fours. Immediately, others chased after him. A shower of light arrows suddenly rained down between them, causing the ground to explode. The one who had fired the arrows was a team member wearing the same colored armor as the one holding the ball.

Dirt flying in all directions was deflected by an invisible shield, while a sharp wind blew away any lingering flames. Harsh criticisms and shouts ripped through the air.

Watching this ferocious spectacle, the Emperor took a sip of the warm tea that Yuliver had prepared. A small magic heater ensured the inside of the carriage remained cozy.

As the carriage wheels slowly turned, the view outside the window shifted accordingly. The Emperor’s gaze wandered toward the grand structure appearing beyond the entrance of the Cavalry headquarters.

Just like Kishiar’s taste, he mused.

Before the building had been erected, the Emperor had seen the drawings Kishiar had personally designed and brought forward. Even though much time had passed since the Cavalry had been established, the image had lingered in the Emperor’s mind. Seeing it come to life was somewhat surreal.

“Your Majesty, once this place is built, please visit at least once,” Kishiar had pleaded during a time when debates over the establishment of the Cavalry raged among the nobility. Back then, the Emperor had considered the possibility that he might die without ever seeing the building. Up until recently, that thought had not changed.

Yet now, he sat there, without any pain, physically witnessing the building of the Cavalry headquarters.

Who could understand the freedom, the miraculous novelty that this realization bestowed upon him?

Knock, knock.

Just then, a knock came from outside the carriage. The line of carriages that had been in front had disappeared, leaving the Emperor’s carriage at the forefront.

When Yuliver opened the door, a chilly wind rushed in.

The Emperor locked eyes with a Cavalry member standing upright in a neat black uniform. The man had pale skin and black hair, and he stood there in the cold as if he were a glass figure, devoid of any emotional fluctuation. He bowed his head in greeting.

“Is it the Count Elliot who is scheduled to visit the Cavalry today?”

“Yes, that is correct.”

The steward answered on behalf of the Count.

“My name is Yuder Aile, the assistant to the Commander of the Cavalry. Please refer to me as Sir Aile. On behalf of the Cavalry and its Commander, I extend a warm welcome to our guests.”

The name Count Elliot was, of course, an alias. Despite knowing that the Emperor had come in disguise, Yuder’s unflappable demeanor was strikingly bold.

Impressed by Yuder’s composure, the Emperor descended from the carriage, supported by his attendant. The view of the Cavalry was far more splendid up close than it had seemed from within the carriage. Unconsciously, the Emperor muttered as he looked up at the building.

“Indeed… this is the Cavalry.”

“Correct, Count Elliot. The entirety of the Cavalry is open to you. If there is any place you’d like to visit or anything you’re curious about while you’re here, please feel free to ask.”

Yuder’s polite response seemed to lift the Emperor’s mood. Perhaps he’d been waiting for it.

“Very well. Thank you for taking time from your busy schedule, Sir Aile.”

The Emperor cheerfully took the lead, and Yuder and the attendant followed him into the main entrance.

Yuder guided the disguised Emperor throughout the various areas of the Cavalry. The Emperor, who must have largely recovered his stamina by now, showed no signs of fatigue. When something caught his eye, he would pause to observe it or ask questions without hesitation. He appeared more like an elegant young scholar engrossed in his studies than the ruler of a nation.

“What are these chain-like objects used for?”

“They are weights that our members wear on their limbs to build strength.”

“And those plants growing out of the walls indoors?”

“They’re medicinal herbs cultivated by our medical division’s pharmacist.”

“I’ve never seen such herbs before.”

Thinking about it, Emperor Katchian in his past life had never toured the Cavalry this way. The meticulous attention of Emperor Keilusa, who spared no detail, reminded Yuder that he was indeed Kishiar’s kin.

Even if the Emperor had known what the Cavalry was like from letters and various information, seeing it in person must have been a different experience.

Having satisfied his curiosity, the Emperor eventually went to meet Nipollen, a kitten that had become something of a local celebrity in the central corridor of the unit.

“Is this kitten truly Nipollen Van Tain, the fifth son of the Tain Family?”

“Yes, that is correct.”

“I wouldn’t know just by looking.”

As the Emperor mumbled, the kitten, perched on the railing, briefly opened its green eyes and perked up its ears. Recognizing the Awakener, the kitten wound its tiny tail around Yuder’s hand before letting go.

“Ah, hello.”

“Is that… a greeting?”

The Emperor asked curiously.

“In the words of First Son Pruelle, yes. He said it’s good to respond, so I have been. Others in the Cavalry also reciprocate the greeting.”

Yuder replied, implying that he was not the only one who returned the peculiar greeting. The corners of the Emperor’s mouth twitched up slightly in amusement. The attendant couldn’t help but laugh outright.

“The Cavalry is indeed a fascinating place. A place where you must reciprocate a kitten’s greeting, hmm?”

At that moment, Nipollen flicked its tail toward the palm of the Emperor.

“Are you trying to greet me now?”

“Yes. You might need to come a little closer.”

“I wonder if that’s advisable.”

Emperor Keilusa hesitated briefly before taking a step closer and extending the back of his hand toward the cat. Nipollen curled its tail around the Emperor’s wrist for a moment before releasing it.

Breaking the brief silence, the Emperor slowly opened his mouth to respond.

“Greeting each other is a good thing. May your day be always filled with blessings.”

Nipollen tilted its head and let out a soft mew. It was amusing to see a fully grown man solemnly and warmly greeting a cat the size of his palm, yet the atmosphere around them grew warmer.

“You’re not greeting me, I see. I can return greetings well too, you know.” Yuliver chuckled.

“Nipollen is fond of Awakeners and keeps its distance from others.”

“How fascinating. To be able to discern that”

Just then, footsteps echoed from downstairs, revealing the presence of someone. Ever and Kanna ascended side by side, stopping in surprise when they saw Yuder and the Emperor’s entourage.

“Yuder?”

Yuder briefly explained that he was escorting a visitor to the Cavalry without mentioning the Emperor’s name.

“Ah, I see.”

Accepting the explanation, they both nodded, then took out what appeared to be a homemade cushion from their bag and placed it on the stair railing.

“Look, Nippy. Your favorite red cushion. Ever made it new. Do you like it?”

The cat, which had recently shown increased interest in new objects, got up from its spot and moved to the new cushion. It rubbed its body against the cushion and let out a tiny mew, causing Ever to smile slightly.

“It looks like it likes it. That’s good.”

“We’ll be going then, Yuder. See you later.”

After the two left and some time had passed, the Emperor spoke again.

“Those two were Deputy Commanders for Shin and Jung Divisions, weren’t they?”

“Yes, that’s correct.”

“Even in the presence of a stranger, there’s no sense of guard or retreat. Is this the usual atmosphere here?”

Watching Nipollen reach out its paws as if trying to grab something from the air, Yuder gave a slight nod.

“Yes.”

“Such an atmosphere cannot be artificially created. The Commander’s capability is truly remarkable.”

Though his expression remained largely unchanged, Yuder sensed that the Emperor was in quite a good mood. The Emperor gazed at the cushion where Nipollen lay for a moment before declaring that he’d like to get down to the day’s agenda.

They headed to an indoor training room that Yuder had previously reserved.

“We will be training together in this room.”

“Smaller than I thought. Will others not enter?”

“This indoor training room is reserved for specific individuals, so for the next three hours, no one else will come.”

“Three hours, huh.”

“Sir Yuliver, please wait outside. During the training, I would prefer that the other attendants not enter as well.”

To the outside eye, the Emperor was accompanied only by a single chief attendant. However, Yuder sensed the presence of about five hidden knights. Casually revealing this awareness, the older chief attendant’s eyes sharpened.

“As expected from Baron Aile. Understood, Sir.”

Retreating, his gaze carried a sense of trust and satisfaction toward Yuder.

“Let’s get started then. Please, have a seat here.”

As commanded by the Emperor, he took a seat in the chair. Yuder pulled another chair closer so they could face each other.

After briefly examining the Emperor’s transformed face, Yuder was the first to speak.

“How are you feeling today?”

“Compared to before, quite well. I have no pains.”

“That’s good to hear.”

“Although we call it training, I have no idea how to refine such an ability. What method will you choose?”

“The abilities of Count Elliot can be closely categorized as ‘Jung’ if we were to sort them within the Cavalry Divisions. It’s the ability to read information through a medium.”

It wasn’t like Kanna, who could directly read information from the subject she touched. However, he could hear distant conversations and see his surroundings through an object imbued with his power. It was an ability with enormous potential.

“To stabilize and further develop your power, the first step is to accurately gauge your current level and limitations. That’s what we will focus on today.”

“Current level and limitations, you say.”

“You may find it physically demanding. If you feel it’s too difficult, you can stop at any time.”

“Very well. I’m looking forward to it.”

“Then first, let me get the materials ready.”

As Yuder extended his hand, miscellaneous items in the training room began to tremble as if caught in the wind. Soaring into the air as if drawn by telekinesis, they silently arranged themselves neatly on the table. The Emperor was secretly a bit astonished.

To manipulate objects so delicately with just wind. Even a skilled wind mage would find this challenging.

“Count, I’ve heard you’ve only imbued your power into one or two items momentarily. Is that correct?”

“That’s right.”

“Would you now imbue your power into all of these objects?”

“All of them?”

“Yes. Not a single one should be left out.”

The demonic trainer of the Cavalry issued the Emperor his first training task.

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Chapter 593

Three hours after the Emperor entered the training room.

The chief attendant, who had been sitting quietly outside, sprang to his feet at the sound of the door opening. The first to emerge was Yuder Aile, looking no different than when he had entered.

“Is the training session over?”

“Yes, it’s finished.”

“And what of the Count?”

“He is resting inside. He expressed a desire to leave quietly without any escort, so I’m taking my leave first.”

“I see. How did the training go?”

While the Emperor was of concern, the chief attendant was equally curious about how the initial training session had gone. But the training room was so soundproofed that one couldn’t even guess what had transpired inside.

Hearing the chief attendant’s heartfelt question, Yuder answered obediently.

“It went exceptionally well. To be honest, I thought it might be impossible to complete everything in three hours. I now realize I worried too much.”

“Is that so!”

A relieved smile brightened the chief attendant’s face, and his eyes, usually stern, moistened slightly. However, he quickly reined in

his emotions and bowed deeply.

“You’ve worked hard.”

“Yes, let’s meet again at the same time tomorrow.”

Exchanging farewells, Yuder walked quietly down the corridor and disappeared from view. Eagerly entering the training room, the chief attendant saw the Emperor lying listlessly among the scattered debris on the floor. His eyes widened in surprise.

“My Lord, why are you lying there?”

He had watched over the Emperor since he was a first-born prince toddling around, but he had never seen him so carelessly sprawled on the floor. Unlike his energetic brother, the Emperor had always been more of a composed and elegant type, preferring to sit and read.

“Ah, Yuliver.”

The Emperor, a beat too slow, called out the chief attendant’s name. He declined the help to rise and spoke listlessly.

“The floor is quite cool; it’s not so bad. No one else is looking, so let me lie here for a moment.”

“But what kind of training has exhausted you to this extent? Baron Aile mentioned it went very well.”

“Did he say that?”

The Emperor chuckled lightly, a wisp of sweat-soaked hair falling across his forehead, making him look strangely unfamiliar.

“Yes, didn’t he?”

“Rather than doing well, it was more like clinging to the edge of a cliff while a merciless beast prodded me. I barely hung on.”

“Excuse me?”

A beast? A cliff? These were utterly baffling terms to the chief attendant. The Emperor muttered softly.

“I always thought that the harshest teacher I would ever encounter in my life was my mother, who personally taught me horseback riding… It seems the old saying ‘there’s always a sky above a mountain’ holds true.”

Three hours. In some respects, a very short time.

But in the three hours he had spent in the training room with Yuder, the Emperor felt as if time had stretched to almost five times its length.

During that time, Yuder had pushed the Emperor to his limits in every conceivable way. He had activated abilities in dozens of objects, hurled them out the window with the force of the wind so they wouldn’t be seen by others, all while making the Emperor feel the limits of those activated powers. And that was just the beginning.

While simultaneously perceiving information from dozens of locations, Yuder recited spells to the Emperor. Waves of nausea washed over him, and his head throbbed as if it would split open. Yet he never blinked, giving the Emperor a series of commands.

“You should be able to handle this much at your current level. Even the Cavalry initially claimed it would be difficult, but my judgments have never been wrong. The sensation you find difficult is akin to muscle soreness from wielding an unfamiliar power. Don’t be fooled.”

“Think of your power as an extension of your own limbs. When people move their fingers or toes, they don’t have to consciously think about it. Why then do you struggle so much with these newfound abilities?”

“Try it one more time. If it doesn’t work this time, take a sip of water and try again.”

The option to simply give up did not exist for him. When asked where the water was, Yuder created water with a flick of his finger, levitating it in a shape resembling a cup before handing it to the Emperor. It was the first time the Emperor had ever drunk water created in such a manner.

Observing Yuder effortlessly manipulate the stream of water at just the right temperature without spilling a single drop, the Emperor suddenly realized the stark difference in their ability to control their powers. Yuder Aile was truly someone who could perfectly control his abilities. When he demonstrated as much, there was no room left for excuses.

Before Yuder’s dispassionate gaze, which seemed to trample any feeble excuses, the Emperor rallied all his willpower and patience. He had endured enough pain to become sick of it. What was one more round of training?

Nonetheless, at the end, his senses were so scrambled that he couldn’t tell whether he was in a training room or some unknown outdoor training ground. Finally, he collapsed under the table. Sweat poured down like rain, and he felt like his insides were flipping over. Yet, scraping along the floor, he managed to complete the final task. A sense of accomplishment unlike any other surged through the Emperor’s heart. It felt like waking up from a demonic trance.

“As I told you, you’d be able to do it. You’ve completed it all in precisely three hours.”

Beside the panting Emperor, Yuder spoke briefly. There were no pleasantries or apologies for the Emperor’s hardship. No unnecessary personal conversations took place either. Nevertheless, the Emperor found his impartial attitude very refreshing.

Unlike with others, lying on the floor in his presence didn’t make the Emperor feel humiliated or ashamed. In front of Yuder’s straightforward attitude and firm guidance, the Emperor felt like he was not the ruler but simply Keilusa La Orr, an individual, for the first time in a very long while.

Clearly, just as Kishiar had said, Yuder was an exceptional Awakener and a magnificent trainer. He was in no way inadequate to be the Emperor’s mentor.

The time the Emperor had to personally train under Yuder was not long, and he planned to make full use of the brief respite by spending even more time here tomorrow.

Though the thought made his limbs quiver in anticipation, the Emperor felt a mix of excitement and regret.

Kishiar, I know you have your plans, but don’t leave such a talent buried in obscurity any longer, the Emperor thought.

Yuder Aile might be a figure whose name would eternally resound through history. That was a premonition he had felt as a scholar who loved history long before he became Emperor. He sensed that neither one’s social standing, age, nor any other constraint would hold back such a person.

As he pondered why such a brilliant individual would walk a difficult path, tarnished by scandal alongside his own brother, the Emperor grew increasingly troubled. The more he thought about it, the more he felt that there must be some special reason that bound his brother to Yuder, which left him with a bittersweet sentiment.

Choice is, after all, a two-way street.

How could one control the emotions directed toward another? Emperor Keilusa knew this better than anyone else.

Both the brother he valued and the prodigy he admired occupied his thoughts, as he let out a small sigh.

“Your Grace, a letter from the Crown Prince has arrived. He was particularly anxious about hearing your response to the message he sent you earlier.”

“Why is he so restless about my opinion now? I will look at the letter later; you may leave it.”

Duke Diarca stared coldly at the letter from the Crown Prince that his servant had handed over. Ignoring an imperial letter was a breach of protocol, but who would dare to correct Duke Diarca?

The nobles seated beside the Duke did not worry as they observed the Crown Prince’s letter being treated like a trifling matter.

“You did well, Your Grace. The Crown Prince didn’t even consider you during the audience. Now he seems rather anxious.”

“Until last year, I heard he was quite discerning and even held you in higher regard than his own flesh and blood. I wonder who has poisoned his ear.”

“Is it really someone else’s doing? One can’t blame the gardener if the seed is rotten.”

At that metaphor, a hushed laughter filled the room, mingled with the scent of intoxicating herbs.

Taking a deep drag from his long pipe filled with herbal mixtures, Duke Diarca exhaled the smoke and mumbled,

“One can’t simply let it wither and die. Annoying as it is, I’ll have to trim the branches and fertilize it. I need to find some suspects involved in the invasion of the Sun Palace and hand them over.”

“You’re truly merciful.”

Sincere praises flowed from various corners. Suddenly, one among them spoke up as if recalling something.

“Speaking of which, it was quite noisy on the road here today. Apparently, it’s due to the recruitment of the Cavalry.”

“Ah, I noticed too. Duke Peletta seems to be over the moon these days. It’s unbearably noisy; when will it end?”

The nobles, aggrieved by the recent activities, took turns railing against the Cavalry recruitment and Duke Peletta. Since Duke Diarca was occupied with smoking his strong herbal mixture and did not stop them, their criticisms became increasingly harsh.

“Do you really think they can be selective when they’re recruiting on such a massive scale? I heard they wouldn’t notice even if a pig joined, not to mention a human.”

“Haha, that’s amusing. Should I send my lowest stableman there? I wonder if they would recognize him.”

“I should join the bet too.”

“I’ll add my share. It’s the perfect opportunity to send in the dwarf clown I just hired.”

“Hahaha.”

“Duke Diarca, Your Grace. Would you care to join us?”

When someone boldly broke the silence, everyone momentarily paused. The man who had raised this significant topic was Baron

Renbow, responsible for coordinating with the Crown Prince's healers.

Duke Diarca, who had been puffing away at his pipe, nonchalantly asked, "Doesn't sound like an entertaining topic. Is there a reason for bringing this up?"

"If you're just going to send some stable hand, it wouldn't be interesting, of course. But isn't this the perfect time to plant eyes and ears within the Cavalry?"

"You think I hadn't considered that when I heard about the recruitment, Renbow? Finding an Awakener suitable for such a long-term mission is quite challenging. You'd need someone you've known for at least five years to trust them with the task. Those guys have only been around for two years. It'd be less risky to wait for the new recruits and win them over."

"Of course, Your Grace the Duke would have thought much deeper than I have. But haven't you forgotten something? The healers you met recently are also Awakeners, ever ready to serve you."

At that, everyone fell silent. Duke Diarca removed the pipe from his lips and tapped out the ashes as he inquired, "Renbow, upon reflection, was this suggestion not yours but rather proposed by them first?"

"Haha, I won't deny it."

Sly foxes, thought Duke Diarca, his gaze fixed on Renbow but tinged with a cold interest.

After a brief pause, Duke Diarca slowly nodded his head.

"Fine. After meeting them before, my interest was piqued as well. Go ahead and proceed as you see fit."

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Chapter 594

Yuder finished his daily tasks and sat down in a chair upon entering his room.

Though he had completed his work outside, that didn’t mean he could head straight to bed. With an impending departure from the capital, he needed to clean his room whenever he could afford the time.

Lately, theres just so much stuff piling up.

Dried flowers filled numerous vases, and that was just the tip of the iceberg. Drawers were overflowing with gifts that had come from all corners. Among them, of course, were the multitude of clothes and jewels that Kishiar had lavishly given him.

In his past life, Yuder had never felt that his room was too cramped no matter where he lived. But these days, his space felt increasingly unfamiliar due to the clutter.

But I have no intention of moving out.

Yuder had little desire to leave, even after exceeding the allowed period of staying in the dormitory for his group. The only remaining option was to meticulously organize his belongings.

There was no need to reorganize the items he had received from Kishiar; those had already been shoved into the wardrobe. The current issue was the influx of gifts he had received since returning from the west.

Yuder began to sift through the hastily stored items. He sorted them by type; small objects were placed in boxes, and larger items

were neatly arranged. Some particularly important items were set aside.

This brooch was from the Western Mage Union. and this pen was a gift from the Baron, representing the officials of the West…”

The brooch, embedded with a yellow magic stone, had come from Micalin Punt of the Western Mage Union. According to the letter, the yellow color symbolized the union, and the brooch had been engraved with a protective spell and the union’s emblem that would be particularly useful for research in the Great Sarain Forest forest.

Though permanent usage was naturally impossible, the letter boasted that it would still prove useful, given the extra effort in its creation. At the very least, it seemed incomparable to the disposable protective bracelet he had received from Alik when he had experienced his second gender manifestation.

This gift held further significance considering it contained a magic stone from the newly discovered vein in the Great Sarain Forest.

Thanks to that discovery, the long-stalled process of dividing the boundaries within Great Sarain Forest is restarting.

The Great Sarain Forest, whose abnormal growth had been halted, was currently being extensively logged. Once that was completed, the nations sharing the forest would reestablish their borders. The speed and efficiency with which the nations had come together, with the large vein as a focal point, was startling.

He had suspected as much, but even the nobles and historically allied western nations couldnt ignore the opportunity to make a fortune. To secure even a slightly larger share of the magic stone vein, they would have to bow their heads to the Emperor of Orr, who had until now been underestimated. Emperor Keilusa wouldnt miss this chance; by now, he was likely expanding his influence.

Yuder attached the brooch to the inner lining of his clothes. It looked like a useful item that could come in handy when he left the capital.

Next, the pen that the Baron had sent was not an ordinary quill; it was enchanted. Created to resemble the one Baron used, the nib was fortified against wear, and a grip made of fabric and wood added an element of luxury.

The magic on this pen turns water into ink.

Under normal circumstances, a pen required a separate ink source, necessitating constant preparation. To mitigate this, a select few who wrote frequently used enchanted pens that could turn water into ink.

Of course, even that had its limitations. Despite its high cost, the item only had a half-year lifespan, leading some to label it a monumental waste. Yet, for someone in a position like the Baron, such inconveniences were trivial.

The top of the pen was elegantly engraved with the Baron's initials and the family crest. The mere existence of this pen would assure any ordinary officer that there was a close relationship between Yuder and the Baron.

I should definitely take this with me.

Yuder picked up the pen. As he was organizing a few more items, a letter that had been mixed with the contents of a small box fell out.

What's this?

It was a letter from Prince Ejain he had received not too long ago. Due to events with Kishiar, he had been too preoccupied to read it thoroughly and had forgotten about it after placing it in the drawer.

Yuder unfolded the letter from Prince Ejain. True to form, it was written in beautiful script and emitted a mysterious fragrance.

“To my esteemed friend, Yuder Aile,”

The content of the letter was not lengthy. Prince Ejain seemed to have successfully expanded his influence within Nelarn. This implied that, once the internal chaos of the country was resolved, he would ascend to the throne.

Ejain had written that once peace and laughter returned to the people of Nelarn, he wanted to establish a group similar to the Cavalry there.

“I already have loyal and virtuous Awakeners following me. I believe that they could form the cornerstone of such an organization. At that time, I plan to reach out for an alliance with the Cavalry.”

Ejain seemed to be seriously contemplating his future reign. The emotions emanating from the letter felt peaceful and filled with newfound certainty.

“If you, Yuder Aile, who has guided me in thinking about the future and serves as the assistant to the Commander of the renowned Cavalry, could come here, the Awakeners of Nelarn would gain much strength. Although I do not know when, I hope you will consider this favorably.”

Should Ejain request assistance in establishing an organization similar to the Cavalry, it would be beneficial for Yuder to maintain close relations with him.

If the day ever came for Yuder to visit, it wouldn’t feel too unfamiliar. He had visited Nelarn a few times in his previous life.

Yuder silently read through to the postscript at the end.

“P.S. Not long ago, I suddenly had a fever that startled everyone. They thought I was poisoned, but it turned out that I had manifested my second genderAlpha. Although I’m still adjusting to having a second gender, I believe I will get used to it soon.”

Ejain was an Alpha, not surprising. From the letter alone, it was evident that he was adapting and developing well as an Awakener, so Yuder wasn’t overly concerned for his future.

Ejain was capable enough to claim a throne and build an empire even when times were tough; now he had also gained truly loyal subordinates. The fact that he still called Yuder a friend made him slightly uncomfortable, but the time to correct that had long passed.

Yuder tucked the letter back into its place, contemplating the faint aroma it emitted, which perhaps came from Ejain’s second gender. Even though the scent had largely dissipated over time, touching the paper gave him a tingling sensation that was hard to describe.

The scent was conveyed not only through the sense of smell but also through the skin. It seemed that Prince Ejain had just manifested his Alpha status and the aroma clung intensely to the letter he had written.

Yuder pondered for a moment before pulling out a piece of paper and began writing a reply with the Baron’s pen. He penned the customary greetings he’d often used during his days as a Cavalry Commander, and filled the rest of the page with some cautionary advice he knew for a newly manifested Alpha.

With this, I can consider repaying the compassion he showed me in my previous life.

Handing it off to Kishiar would ensure that it would get sandwiched between the letters going to Nelarn.

Yuder placed the letter to be sent on the table.

The next day, Kishiar, who received the letter, responded cheerfully that he would deliver it well. Unbeknownst to him, he would be ensnared by the unexpected beauty that was Kishiar as he sipped his tea and stayed much longer than anticipated.

“Alright! Second regular meeting of the Intelligence Unit, commence!”

“Applause!”

Awkward clapping filled the recreation room as everyone heard Eldore siblings’ shout.

“Devran, why arent you clapping louder? Do it like Gakane.”

“Why should I? Yuder didn’t tell me to.”

Devran questioned with a scrunched face.

“Just because it’s fun? Anyway, I brought some snacks today, so let’s talk while eating.”

“Sure, we also have a special guest today.”

Everyone’s eyes turned toward the day’s special guest, Kanna Wand. Kanna grinned and greeted them with an exaggerated aristocratic flair.

“Fine, youve all had these fabulous meetings without me, which I’m a bit envious of, but Im included today, so its alright. Hinn even brought me some butter cookies.”

“Are they good?”

“Absolutely delicious. Where did you get these? From the Fifth Wall District?”

“Let’s halt the small talk and focus now.”

The room quickly quieted down at Yuders words as he flipped through his documents. While his eyes still twinkled playfully, he looked around seriously at the Eldore siblings, special guest Kanna, a seemingly more tired but invigorated Gakane, and Devran, whose face had considerably tanned from sun exposure.

Except for Enon, who worked alone, today's meeting gathered all members of the Intelligence Unit. The meeting was a mid-term review organized for those who would soon vacate the capital to help the second recruitment of the Cavalry.

The main topics of the meeting were information sharing about the Star of Nagran and the sage, which was why Kanna had been specially invited.

"Firstly, if anyone has acquired new information since our last meeting, please share."

"Can I go first?"

Gakane timidly raised his hand.

"I felt like I havent been contributing much since our last meeting, so I did some legwork. While I didnt find much about the sage, I did learn something about the southern tribe symbols that Yuder had asked us to investigate."

"Really? How?"

"Ive had some interactions with people from the South recently. I asked them what I should do to learn more about the South, and they lent me a book. It was written by someone who visited the South about 15 years ago. Apparently, it's now out of print."

"Ah, really?"

Gakane placed the worn book on the table for everyone to see. The old cover didn't even display a title.

"After reading it, I found out which tribal symbol Yuder had sketched. It definitely belongs to the Ansuma Mehet tribe. In our language, it means 'Wolfs Eye.' It was traditionally the largest tribe in the South and even united the entire region to form a nation once."

Despite the busy schedule, Gakane's explanation flowed smoothly.

"And the author of this book assessed that this tribe is far more dangerous than any other in the South."

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Chapter 595

“And the author of this book assessed that this tribe is far more dangerous than any other in the South.”

Ansuma Mehet, the Wolf’s Eye Tribe. The name that had been a hazy memory in Yuder’s mind became crystal clear upon hearing Gakane’s explanation.

‘Ah yes, that was the name.’

“During the time this book was written, the Ansuma Mehet Tribe was the most influential in the South. Unlike other tribes who openly argued that they should return to the times before the ‘Sand War,’ they were unusually friendly toward northerners. But that’s what made them more dangerous,” Gakane said.

“The Sand War? That sounds somewhat familiar…”

“Why would their kindness make them more dangerous?”

Both Hinn Eldore and Devran asked simultaneously.

“Ah, well, if you’re not from the South, you might not know. The Sand War was a conflict that erupted several centuries ago when the south invaded across the desert. Thanks to a treaty we won back then, the South haven’t invaded past the desert since. There are still many war memorials and statues in the South,” Gakane explained, sounding like he had an intimate knowledge of that war. Before finishing, he added a little awkwardly, “And the renowned general who led merely 100,000 troops to defeat a Southern army ten times their size in the Battle of Black Sands is actually my ancestor, Jureli Bolunwald.”

“Oh, no wonder you know so much.”

“You really do come from an illustrious family, don’t you?”

Everyone was intrigued, but learning this fact didn’t make them see Gakane as more distant or create an awkward atmosphere. Gakane, who might have been internally worried, sported a blooming smile on his face.

“I’ll introduce you to all of it when we eventually visit the South. Anyway, the reason their kindness was perceived as more dangerous is easier to understand when you consider why the author went to the South in the first place.”

According to Gakane, the person who wrote the book had been a low-ranking employee in a trading company in the Orr Empire. Upon hearing that an increasing number of merchants and engineers were traveling to the South for business expansion, he was dispatched as part of a group to evaluate new business opportunities.

Other tribal people did not hide their aversion or dislike toward these northerners. However, the Ansuma Mehet tribe was different. They treated the visitors from north of the desert with exceptional politeness.

Convinced by audacious offers of wealth and honor in return for advancing trade and technology, many chose to stay.

The owner of the company where the author worked was swayed by these offers and decided to set up a new branch there. Employees complied with the Southerners’ requests, teaching them arithmetic and the language of the Empire.

The author also taught the Imperial language to the children, and surprisingly excelled in this, gaining many Southerner friends. Eventually, through an introduction, he even began to teach the future chieftain’s son. This experience became the turning point that made the author rethink his decision to stay long-term in the South.

“Now, look at this part.”

Yuder’s gaze fell on the section Gakane pointed out.

‘- It was one day while I was teaching the chieftain’s son, Surme. The chieftain’s house was unusually noisy. When I asked Surme the reason for the commotion, he said it was just the usual and not to be concerned. However, I sneaked over during my break. What I saw there were people from the Maladi Trading Company, who had boasted of becoming wealthy by settling in the South years before us.’

People from the Maladi upper echelons had said they made a fortune by introducing imperial water facilities and magic stone lighting systems to the southern countries. However, when the author met them again, they were furious, claiming they had lost everything in a moment due to fraud by their southern partners.

“The tribal people responded very kindly to that anger. According to them, it wasn’t fraud but rather a consequence of clauses clearly specified when they began their partnership. It was a loss that the Maladi people had to take responsibility for. To anyone watching, the tribal people’s account seemed accurate. The Maladi upper echelons eventually fled the southern countries a few days later. They were soon forgotten.”

Among those who remained in the southern countries, including the author’s colleagues, the people from the north didn’t seem to care much about this incident. Their minds were filled with thoughts of making big money as quickly as possible in the southern lands. However, the author felt uneasy, recalling the son of the future chieftain saying that this was ‘a common occurrence.’

When the incident repeated for the second time, the author eerily realized that there had been no northern desert dwellers who had stayed in the south for over 10 years.

“It might be a coincidence, but I had a bad feeling. My colleagues thought I was a coward. They taunted me, suggesting I was scared of the Black Moon faith of the southern people. Nevertheless, I decided to follow my mother’s advice to always trust my instincts.”

Unable to bear his unease, the author eventually returned to the Empire alone, dismissing the objections of his superiors, citing health reasons. He then compiled the diaries and records he had kept at that time into a travelogue. That was this very book.

“He was wise not to ignore his gut feelings.”

Yuder concluded after listening to Gakane’s story.

“Even though it was written 15 years ago, there are quite a few points that worry me when reading this book in the current situation. From my research, the merchants who went there almost all failed and came back just as the author had feared. Those who returned claimed they had been robbed of their business foundations and technologies.”

“So they acted friendly but took everything they could.”

“Exactly. And this Black Moon faith they believe in also concerns me. I didn’t know much about their doctrine apart from the stories in the scriptures, but upon investigating, I found that even the old Sand War was supposedly instigated on the surface by this religious doctrine. There, the Goddess of the Black Moon is claimed to be the rightful ruler of the world. They argue that the Sun God stole her rightful place and it needs to be reclaimed.”

“Knowing this now, it’s easier to speculate about the true nature of those southern merchants.”

Kanna spoke clearly.

“The hostile southern forces are hiding their identities while roaming around the Empire looking for opportunities. They’ve been strengthening internally for over a decade without spreading much information externally. Their intentions are absolutely, absolutely, absolutely not good.”

“Do you think they’re planning to wage another war like in the past?”

Devran asked with a furrowed brow.

“We can’t be sure yet. All we can do is dig deeper since we’ve reported what we’ve found.”

“Gakane, good job. It seems you’ve brought back valuable information.”

Yuder quietly praised Gakane.

“If we hadn’t known that they are currently meddling with the House of Tain and the Star of Nagran, we might have unknowingly established diplomatic relations with them in a few years, just like those merchants did.”

And so, the atmosphere grew tense, each contemplating the implications of what they had just learned.

“Could it have come to that? Still, I’m glad it was of some help.”

What seems unlikely now was a reality that the Orr Empire in Yuder’s previous life had faced. Yuder thought that the hardships the Orr Empire would’ve experienced after his death probably weren’t much different from the accounts of travel journals about various traders brought by Gakane.

‘War.’

War may be fought with swords and blood, but the present Southerners seemed to have learned that money could be more terrifying than a blade. Their ease in donning the masks of merchants to infiltrate the Empire was likely due to the events of that time when those travel journals were written.

Unable to hide his delight, Yuder lightly patted Gakane's flushed shoulder and asked him to continue his investigation.

"I'll report next," Devran raised his hand, a tinge of jealousy coloring his face. Having skipped training sessions to work diligently in a store near the inn where the Star of Nagran had stayed, he'd managed to pick up some rumors.

Access to gossip about the sages in the imperial palace had been limited, but he still found something valuable.

"Local merchants have been saying that recently some suspicious figures have been lurking in Fifth Wall District. I suspect they're Nahan and his associates. I've been extra diligent in my search because I believe they're staying somewhere near Fifth Wall District so they'll know immediately when the sage arrives. And I've found…"

"Did you locate their hideout?"

"Not exactly, but I found a fruit store they frequently visit. So, I switched jobs to that store. The owner of the previous store was quite sad to see me go, but"

"Devran, you haven't forgotten that you're part of the Cavalry, have you?"

"Of course not! Anyway, I didn't find Nahan, but I did find individuals who are suspected Awakeners!"

It wasn’t concrete information, but it was still significant progress. Yuder equally commended Devran.

Next up were the Eldore siblings. They proudly reported that they had intruded into the sage’s lodging and brought back items that helped Kanna decode information.

“Now that we know the owner of that leather strap Gakane found is a noble named Renbow, I’m planning to tail him for a while,” said one of the Eldore siblings.

“Guess it’s finally my turn,” Kanna put down the snack she had been munching on and dusted off her hands.

“I’ve roughly succeeded in determining the abilities of the Awakeners from the Star of Nagran who were staying at the lodging, using the items you guys brought. But there are some cases where I couldn’t decipher their names, so just bear that in mind.”

With her more refined skills, Kanna proceeded to read the information embedded in the items.

“First, there’s an Awakener who can control animals in a manner similar to infection. This person could potentially control humans through animals. Then there’s someone who can make a certain place invisible, useful for both protection and confinement. There’s also someone who can borrow the vision of a specific target to see distant places, and another who can temporarily combine different abilities.”

“Wow, each one of them is formidable. Clearly, they didn’t come this far for nothing,” Devran said, chuckling incredulously.

“And the last person is a bit of a mystery… This person’s ability was the hardest to read. At first, I thought maybe they had a variety of powers or something that mimicked multiple abilities.”

“So, what’s the reality?”

“I hit a wall there. So instead of just relying on my ability, I thought it would be better to consult Gayle and Doyle, who are in the Cavalry, and corroborate based on the attire of the sages we’ve observed so far. With Hinn and Finn’s help, I did just that. And Gayle and Doyle mentioned an individual with a very intriguing ability.”

“Intriguing ability?”

“Yes. Someone who can copy the abilities of others.”

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The atmosphere shifted dramatically when it was mentioned that the Awakener could copy others' powers. Gakane furrowed his eyebrows and cautiously asked,

"So, you mean they can imitate the abilities of other Awakeners? Isn't that the most dangerous power?"

"Yes, exactly. But according to Gayle and Doyle, it's not as formidable as it sounds because it has some weaknesses."

"Ah, is it complex to control?"

"Thats part of it. Also, the copied abilities are significantly weaker than the originals. For instance, if he were to mimic an ability like Gayle and Doyles sword aura, the copied version would be weaker and have a shorter duration."

"I see… Well, naturally, someone with the original power would be stronger then."

"It doesn't seem that easy to just go around copying abilities. If it's that taxing to use even one, attempting more would be out of the question… Besides, it doesnt sound like he has a great reputation."

The person who interjected was Yuder. His eyes seemed even more contemplative than usual. Whenever Yuder had that look, it was as though he was gazing at something far beyond what any of the members could see. Kanna thought this but kept her observations to herself, nodding in agreement.

"Yes, you're right, as always, Yuder. Though I'm not sure about other things, his reputation really wasnt that great. Gayle and Doyle

despised him. He would just take abilities that looked interesting to him without asking for consent. He even had a nicknameCopycat.”

“Wow, hearing that nickname, I get why they disliked him. If someone copied our abilities and acted smug about it, Id challenge them to a duel and drag them to the training grounds immediately!”

Finn wore a face of vehement agreement. Though no one said it out loud, everyone seemed to be pondering what they would do if someone copied their abilities.

No one would feel good about someone else copying something they possessed, especially if it were an inferior imitation.

Moreover, in a closed and diverse group like the Star of Nagran, such an ability would be even less welcome. Its perceived triviality made sense when considering how dangerous it could become, depending on its application and development.

“So, who is this person among the sages party? What do they look like? Did you find out their name?” Devran asked, nearly out of breath.

“Yes. He has a long scar on one ear. His name is Diemon.”

‘As I suspected.’

Yuders eyes darkened even more.

The Diemon he knew now was entirely different from the Diemon he remembered from his past life. This Diemon was youthfully vibrant and timidly followed the true sage who led the Star of Nagran. If not for that prominent scar on his ear, it would have been difficult to identify him as the same person.

The ability Yuder originally knew Diemon to possess was merely manipulation of emotions. But none of that power’s traces were

found in the abilities used during the recent Sun Palace incursion.

There were only two plausible explanations for all of this.

First, the real ability Diemon had was different from what Yuder originally knew.

Second, Diemon gained a new second ability after the internal collapse of the Star of Nagran.

And now, the revealed truth seemed to lean toward the first option.

‘If he can copy others’ abilities, then it would be possible for a young man to age, or for him to manifest powers different from what I remember. There would be no fixed ability, per se.’

In that case, what he told Yuderthat his ability was to alter other peoples emotionswasn’t an outright lie after all.

He never used any other power from the moment he first made his name known in his previous life until the day he died. He must have had some reason why he couldnt use anything but that particular ability.

He still didnt know what that reason was, but now that he was closer to the truth about him, he felt assured that he could prevent future disasters before they happened.

“Is Diemon the only one the brothers have figured out?”

“Theres one more. A man with glasses. They say he goes by the name Nezo. He has been a close confidant of the sage for a very long time. It seems he wasn’t particularly friendly with the brothers, so I couldnt get any more useful information out of him.”

Kanna reported that this man appeared to have an ability related to long-distance vision. It was a shame that they didn’t find out more, but even this much was a significant achievement. Knowing at least the types of abilities they were up against ensured that they could handle whatever came their way.

The help of one person specialized in information really does make a difference.

However, it wasnt to say that the other informants were inferior to Kanna. Her ability wasnt absolute, after all.

Kannas skills shined brightest when she was given sufficient material to read. Conversely, her abilities waned when there was nothing to analyze.

So, it was only logical to expand their intelligence unit for long-term strategy, considering she couldn’t go out and collect minute details due to her lack of physical strength.

Right now, we have fewer than ten people in the intelligence unit, but once we establish branches, we’ll be able to recruit more. Then well have eyes and ears all across the empire.

Awakeners with various abilities would effectively exert their powers not just within the Empire, but globally, gathering all sorts of information. This was just the beginning.

Keeping his thoughts about the distant future to himself and maintaining a calm exterior, Yuder expressed his gratitude to Kanna.

“Thank you, Kanna. This will be extremely helpful for what we have planned next.”

“Don’t mention it. If it werent for the materials and information brought by everyone here, I wouldnt have been able to read so

much. We have interconnected tasks, so it’s best to help each other out!”

Kanna was well aware of the limitations of her own abilities. With a softer look in his eyes, Yuder glanced over at Kanna and the other informants, then shared some things they should be aware of.

“I’ve learned some things myself, so Ill share them here. Remember everything youve heard today and make sure you dont forget.”

The information Yuder shared was concise. He was now completely certain that the perpetrators behind the invasion of the Sun Palace were from the sages entourage, and behind them was the Diarca family. He also mentioned that they had recently come face-to-face for the first time.

Wow so it was them after all.

Hold on, then the recent announcement from Prince Katchian that they were taking on the mission to capture the perpetrators of the Sun Palace invasion is…?

Quick to catch on, the faces of those who had figured out the implications behind Yuders information subtly changed. Considering their complicated feelings, Yuder calmly spoke first.

“I cant go into details, but the Crown Prince didnt take on this mission with full knowledge of the situation. Regardless, now that hes involved, theres likely to be tension between the Diarca family and Crown Prince Katchian for a while. I dont think this will have negative implications for His Majesty the Emperor or our Commander. We should just focus on doing what we have to do.”

The atmosphere shifted distinctly at the mention of Duke Diarca and the Crown Prince. The only commonality in everyone’s expression was the absolute absence of goodwill.

For most, political issues still seemed like a complex narrative from a distant land, yet the memory of Duke Diarca and his cohorts from the last Cavalry party lingered deeply. So deeply, in fact, that since that day, the name “Duke Diarca” had become almost as infamous within the Cavalry as the Imperial Knights.

In simpler terms, people had grown to dislike him so much that they started changing the names of their training targets and balls to mock him.

Ever since we used that half-hearted apology from Baron Durmand as a training target, we’ve really learned something

If word got out that they were using such disrespectful tactics during training, there’d be hell to pay. But frankly, Yuder didn’t mind the growing audacity among the members.

“Most of you already know, but I’ll be leaving the capital soon to assist the Commander in the second recruitment of members,” Yuder said, locking eyes with each of the intelligence officers, his gaze full of resolve.

“Ill be prepared to return at any moment if the situation in the capital changes. But for that, I’ll need your help. So, please take good care of things while I’m away.”

In the past, leaving the capital teeming with enemies wouldn’t have been an option. If Kishiar wasn’t present, and Yuder was also gone, who would handle any unforeseen crises?

But now, it seemed feasible.

Even in Yuder’s absence, he was confident that everyone would perform their roles adequately.

Hadnt he trained them rigorously for just such occasions?

Still, just to be safe, I should intensify the training schedule before I leave.

Unaware of Yuder's thoughts, the intelligence unit members smiled broadly, moved by his words. Yuder too felt content, contemplating new training methods for them.

Thus, the intelligence unit meeting concluded in a warm and cordial atmosphere.

"Yuder, a moment," Kanna said as the meeting dispersed, skillfully pulling Yuder aside. She spoke in a low voice, too soft for anyone else to hear. "I think the bait I threw at Count Gallon, who claims he wants to play my father's role, might catch something."

"Information about Karl Enfile?"

"Yes. You should've seen how he raged at my audacity, only to reconsider and start pleading. Anyway, I'll let you know when Im certain."

"Understood."

"Oh, and about Hosanna. Ever since meeting the Commander, he's been deep in thought. It might just be a matter of time before he opens up. Should we push him a little? What do you think?"

"If you think it's necessary, go ahead. I trust you."

"Mmm. I appreciate your trust, but shaking Hosanna was initially the Commanders success, so I'm hesitant to intervene further. How did he even manage to do what even I couldnt? Could he actually possess some kind of persuasive power? Well, if it's him, it's possible"

In truth, Kishiar wasnt the first to try shaking Hosanna. Kanna, who had been responsible for him all along, was the first to attempt it

but to no avail. Eventually, they had to rely on Kishiar and Nathan Zuckerman.

I never doubted that Kishiar would be successful, but it was surprisingly effective

“By the way, Yuder.”

Kanna was mid-sentence when her eyes suddenly widened upon seeing Yuder’s face, as if she had seen something unbelievable.

“You look… happier? Could it be because I mentioned the Commander?”

“…”

“No, no! You don’t have to answer!”

Just as Yuder was about to speak, Kanna raised her hand to stop him, and swiftly stepped back. Moments later, she hastily offered her goodbyes, saying she had remembered something she needed to do, and then vanished.

“…”

Was he actually happier? Yuder asked himself.

‘It seems so.’

The truth was, he had arrived last to the Intelligence Unit’s meeting today because he had lost track of time, utterly entranced by Kishiar’s face and lingering over his tea.

It was unlike him, as he always prided himself on moving quicker and arriving earlier than everyone else. But strangely, he wasn’t angry about it. Love seemed to have a paralyzing effect on his rationality, to the point that it became frightening.

To be honest, even at this moment, he wanted to see Kishiar.

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Chapter 597

Time flew by at an insane pace as he took care of various matters before leaving the capital. Even when he managed just the bare minimum amount of sleep, the days felt insufficient.

He increased the training intensity for the members, and personally supervised their condition. At the same time, he kept an eye on the progress of Thais Yulmans research and even found time to assess how to best utilize the mansions and lands that the Cavalry had won as prizes in the recent event.

The mansions were initially used as residences for important collaborators of the Cavalry, as well as for members who had rendered significant services. In one particularly serene and beautiful mansion in the Sixth Wall District, Hellem had already moved in with her pet Penpen. Near that mansion, Steiber, who had been living above a dilapidated bakery, relocated with his family.

Another mansion was soon to be formally allocated to Thais Yulman and Alik. Although Thais said he didn’t care where he conducted his research, he didn’t decline the offer of a more spacious and comfortable home at no cost.

The new site was located near the main headquarters of the Cavalry, on land hardly utilized by the Imperial Knights. Kishiar had already decided what buildings to erect on this land and swiftly brought in the engineers who had previously built the main headquarters to complete the foundation work.

Yuder patrolled the construction site with an air of discontent, driving away idle members of the Imperial Knights who had nothing better to do than look for trouble. Afterward, Yuder sought out Enon

to update him on the whereabouts and abilities of the sage and his party.

These days, Enon was particularly on edge, juggling tasks between the intelligence unit and supervising the medicines made by Thais Yulman for Awakeners with second gender. Having conveyed all the necessary information, Yuder was about to leave when Enon caught him and made him ingest a horribly bitter energy stabilizer.

…

Is it bitter?

Fearing a backlash if he said it wasn't, Yuder simply nodded. A fierce smile appeared on Enons face.

Ive taken some inspiration from the ingredients in the second gender stabilizer made by that mage Thais Yulman. It seems suitable for use as a stamina restorer.

Why give it to me?

What do you mean, why? Isnt it obvious? Someone mentioned you were late for a meeting because you were loitering around the Commander's office. I can guess what youve been up to, you know?

…

How did he not get caught? Surely, one of the intelligence agents must be the culprit. But then again, Enon is also part of the intelligence unit, so its not strange for him to know what happened during the meeting.

…Enons deduction based solely on my tardiness is more impressive, really.

Enon was still unaware that Yuder had confided in Kishiar about time travel. However, the way Enon looked at him, he seemed to suspect that something had changed in Yuder's relationship with Kishiar.

I should talk to him.

While Enon might not relish discussing matters related to Kishiar, he was the one who had offered unconditional help, even revealing his own identity when Yuder was troubled by secrets. Yuder at least wanted to let him know that his mind felt more at ease with Kishiar after playing a strategy game together.

Why are you looking at me like that? Are you complaining that it's too bitter?

Unable to decipher the meaning behind Yuders gaze, Enon abruptly shoved a large piece of hard candy into his mouth.

There, all set. Off you go now.

…Thanks, I'll enjoy it.

The candy that Enon had forcibly given him had a dual taste of lemon and sweetness. With a bulging cheek, Yuder headed to the training room for Emperor Keilusa's final session and noticed that the expression of the chief attendant had turned somewhat peculiar. But being a seasoned palace servant, he said nothing and simply greeted Yuder. The Emperor, who had arrived earlier to warm up and experiment with his power, seemed equally composed.

Throughout the last seven hours of training, Emperor Keilusa never once complained of fatigue or irritation, completing every task splendidly. In Yuder's eyes, he was a flawless student. He accepted teachings without reservation, asked questions about things he didn't know, and endured hardships steadfastly. It was no surprise that he progressed more quickly than expected.

Thanks to this, the Emperor’s abilities had improved dramatically in a short period, incomparable to when he first joined the Cavalry.

Yuder believed that, at this level, the Emperor would not face any risks from either failing to harness his powers properly or overexerting himself.

“The scheduled training ends here.”

“…Phew.”

As soon as Yuder’s announcement concluded, the Emperor collapsed heavily into his chair, stretching himself out against its backrest.

“You’ve done well.”

“You’ve worked hard, Count. But I believe you’ve gotten a worthy answer for your efforts.”

“Indeed, I have.”

Over sweat-soaked golden locks, his eyes glinted coldly, full of a deep sense of accomplishment.

“I’ve learned what power is, how to use it, how to achieve my goals without exceeding my limits, and what needs to be done in the future. All thanks to your guidance.”

Yuder then gave the Emperor some final pieces of advice.

“As you’ve felt throughout the training, your power benefits from being discreet and from being used in larger amounts at once. For the transmission and movement of the medium for your power, always make use of your subordinates. Also, listening alone consumes less energy than using both eyes and ears, so keeping just your ears open will help in utilizing your power.”

Emperor Keilusa could use as his eyes and ears any object that passed through his hands, regardless of the type of object. This meant that, given the right conditions, there would be nothing in the Empire that he couldn't see or hear. To use this effectively, he had to carefully conceal his power and prepare advantageous conditions.

"When you return after completing your task, I plan to maintain one or two of the most important mediums, even while sleeping. I want to show my progress to my teacher, so I'll have to work hard."

"Do so, but don't overextend yourself. As I've always said, a person with power is"

"Stronger when they can better control their abilities and know their limits. I've memorized it now."

"Yes, that's correct."

"Don't worry. Who would give up a new life given to them so easily?"

A rare smile crept onto Emperor Keilusa's face. It was a smile that was both similar to and distinct from Kishiar's, but when he smiled like that, the resemblance between the siblings was striking.

"I see that the owner has just returned to the Dawn Palace. I would like to have dinner together, so I must leave now."

With a pleased expression, the Emperor hoisted his weary body upright. All traces of fatigue seemed to have vanished from his face as he mentioned the Empress. Yuder then realized that the Emperor had never relinquished the one medium he had connected to the Empress throughout the arduous training. A wry smile formed in Yuder's mind.

At this rate, you won't need anyone to teach you when I return.

“Please convey my regards to the Commander as well. Stay well until the next time we meet.”

Before Yuder left the Cavalry, Emperor Keilusa had his servants give Yuder a few luxurious balls made of fur and a plush velvet cushion. It was a small gift from the Emperor for the kitten.

“Commander, I’ll be entering.”

Having completed his training with the Emperor, Yuder knocked on the Commander’s office door and opened it a moment later.

Kishiar was sitting not at his work desk but on a sofa. The first thing that caught Yuder’s eye was his somewhat casual yet captivating attire: his coat was off, and his shirt sleeves were rolled up to his elbows.

However, what Kishiar was doing in that relaxed attire was rather strange. In one hand, he held something glittering; in the other, something resembling a seashell. He was performing what seemed like meaningless movements with them.

“What are you doing, Commander?”

“Ah, I was examining a relic that came from Nelarn.”

Only then did Yuder realize that the glittering object was the Mirror of Truth, a magic tool previously obtained from the Shuden Trading Company. It looked merely like a glint of light in Kishiar’s large hand from a distance.

“Has the Count left?”

While still fiddling with both items in his hands, Kishiar casually asked.

“Yes, he wrapped things up wonderfully until the end. He left a gift for Nipollen along with his regards for you, Commander.”

“What kind of gift?”

“Balls made of fur and a purple velvet cushion.”

“Ah, how thoughtful of him.”

Kishiar let out a smile. Yuder navigated through a pile of documents covering the floorapplications from membersand headed toward where Kishiar sat.

As he sat quietly, contemplating what Kishiar was doing, the Commander spoke first.

“I’ve sent the letter you gave me yesterday with the goods to be delivered to Nelarn. They said he should be able to receive it by the end of this month at the latest.”

“Ah, I see.”

“You wrote quite a lengthy letter; the prince will be pleased.”

“Well, it was just a single page, but I included some precautions regarding his Alpha manifestation, which made the content a bit dense.”

“Really? I’m curious about that. I am also an Alpha Awakener, so could you share any knowledge you may have?”

It was a naturally flowing request. Yuder then recited the same information he had written in the letter to Prince Ejain. The content wasn’t anything specialjust some advice on avoiding the heat period with sedatives, keeping a distance from other Awakeners that had manifested second genders, recommended incense for masking

scents, and how one's scent might change depending on emotional or physical conditions.

After hearing everything, Kishiar thanked Yuder, admitting there were a few facts he hadn't known.

"Come to think of it, I remember the prince saying he felt like you already knew about his future. I didn't understand it back then, but you did know about him from the previous game, didn't you?"

"Yes."

"How was he in that previous life?"

'How was he,' indeed. While Yuder pondered how to answer, Kishiar's hands, which had been busy manipulating the seashell and the mirror, momentarily paused.

Reflecting on his memories from the previous life, Yuder slowly began to speak.

"The Silver King followed by Six Stars. Guardian of the Barrier. Ruler of the Setting Sun. These are some of the other names I remember him by."

Kishiar's red eyes blinked slowly as they absorbed Yuder's words.

"Even back then, he had become the King of Nelarn. It was a position he earned only after shedding far more blood than he does now, but he was highly regarded as a formidable ruler with an iron will."

"The Iron-Willed Ruler… feels quite different from now."

"The Nelarn he ruled was renowned as the strongest and safest place in the entire continent. Thanks to his excellent use of his

abilities, no one could physically harm him, and Nelarn itself was impenetrable.”

“Thanks to his defensive abilities, you mean.”

“Yes.”

“Quite impressive. Have you personally met him?”

“I have.”

Yuder hesitated for a moment, contemplating whether it was good to share this information, but eventually decided to speak honestly.

“He didn’t believe what I said, but he did try to save my life once. The man he is now is not the man he was then, but I did give him some advice in the West, and I did want to repay that debt.”

“Your life?”

Kishiar’s eyes seemed to shift slightly. Was it Yuder’s imagination? After blinking once, those red irises met Yuder’s gaze again, looking no different than usual.

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Chapter 598

“Your life?”

Kishiar’s eyes seemed to shift slightly. Was it Yuder’s imagination? After blinking once, those red irises met Yuder’s gaze again, looking no different than usual.

“Were there many moments when your life was in danger? Or is it… the time I’m thinking of?”

It was clear what Kishiar meant by ‘that time.’ It had to be the last day of Yuder’s life that he had seen in his dream.

Although framed as a question, Kishiar seemed fairly certain about what the answer would be. Yuder responded with a face as impassive as possible.

“It’s the time you’re thinking of. There haven’t been many occasions when someone in another country would try to save my life.”

“Not many, you say.”

Kishiar repeated Yuder’s last words as if muttering to himself. His expression remained unchanged, but something about the eyes shadowed by golden lashes seemed to darken. Yuder quickly added another comment.

“To clarify, aside from that one time, I’ve never received such an offer. I hope you don’t misunderstand that this happens often.”

“Ah… I see.”

Kishiar finally gave a small smile.

“It’s clear that Prince Ejain possesses exceptional judgment in recognizing talent. With that in mind, it doesn’t seem strange for you to want to repay the debt. I understand completely.”

However, even after his words were done, Kishiar’s hands, holding the magic artifact and relic, remained stretched out, unmoving.

“Is there anything else you’re curious about?”

“It’s not that I’m curious, but… No, never mind.”

Uncharacteristically for a man who could skillfully find out anything, Kishiar hesitated and backed off.

“It makes me uneasy when you say that. Please, just say what’s on your mind.”

“Anything, you say? Truly?”

“Yes.”

“…”

No reply came. Instead, Kishiar’s eyes squinted slightly in the silence. As Yuder wondered if he had said something wrong, Kishiar reached out and gently touched his cheek.

“Hmm… Saying ‘anything is fine’ seems to be too risky. You’d best avoid being so careless.”

“Why is it careless to say I can answer any question you have?”

“That’s what I mean.”

Kishiar responded with a faint, bitter smile.

“If I take your words to mean ‘anything,’ who knows what I might end up doing.”

“That’s a strange thing to say.”

Of all things, “not knowing one’s limits” hardly suited Kishiar. Wondering if he was trying to divert the conversation because he didn’t want to talk, Yuder spoke again.

“Let’s change the topic then.”

“Hmm?”

“I’d like to know what you’re thinking. Is it alright to ask that?”

At that, Kishiar blinked a couple of times before bursting into laughter. His laughter didn’t die down for quite some time in front of Yuder, who frowned slightly.

“Ah… I doubt there’s anyone better than you, my assistant, at extracting confessions.”

“Why do you laugh as you say that?”

“It’s a surrender. Ill tell you.”

Raising both hands, Kishiar signaled his surrender, and the smile around his eyes deepened.

“My thoughts are simple. Firstly, I was thinking how nice it would be if you were sitting beside me instead of across from me…”

Without another word, Yuder immediately rose and moved to sit next to Kishiar.

“Yes. And what else were you thinking?”

The smile finally vanished from the gaze that felt ever closer, ever deeper.

With a small sigh, the man who had lost his playful demeanor lowered his eyes.

“I thought I wanted to hold you.”

Was that all he intended to say?

Or was there another question lurking?

It was uncertain, but for some reason, it felt like even if asked further, he wouldn’t reveal more.

Staring at Kishiar’s idle hands, Yuder remained silent for a moment. Despite saying he wanted to hold him, Kishiar made no move to do so. Finally, Yuder gently raised his hand.

As soon as his black-gloved fingers touched Kishiar’s shoulder, something dropped with a soft clatter. Turning his gaze, he found it was an old hand mirror and a seashell.

‘Those precious things.’

Before he could even open his mouth, the man whose hands were now free pulled Yuder into an embrace tighter than ever before.

Feeling the slight pressure on the nape of his neck and the tickle of hair against his skin, all other thoughts seemed to vanish from his mind. Yuder exhaled deeply and leaned his own head against Kishiar. Despite being just a hug, it felt as if all the tension and fatigue that had built up throughout the day washed away.

‘It’s not because the medicine Enon gave me is finally kicking in…’

Rather, it was because deep down, he had been yearning for this moment while they talked.

Yuder caressed Kishiar's cheek, lifted his head, and their lips met. After a lingering kiss, what he smelled was his own scentundeniably intense. It felt so apparent even to himself that he realized his heat period wasn't far off.

'I wish it would come before we leave the capital… But who knows.'

Just then, as Kishiar welcomed Yuder's scent and further entwined their tongues, he collapsed entirely onto the sofa, interrupting his thoughts.

"Haah"

Though it was the case yesterday as well, every time Kishiar sensed the scent that increasingly slipped from Yuder's control, he seemed reluctant to let him go. When he himself smelled it, it was merely a mild scent, but to an Alpha, it may have felt differently.

Yuder felt the scent of Kishiar, who had also been quite forthright with his own scent.

The sharp, flaming desire he sensed was so vivid. Amidst the unhesitant touches, nothing else seemed to matter.

Days passed in a flurry of tasks, and finally, the day arrived when they would set out to directly participate in the second round of recruiting members for the Cavalry.

The party consisted only of Kishiar, Yuder, and Nathan Zuckerman. Though their departure appeared humble, with only three horses instead of a carriage, to those who knew of their individual strengths and abilities, the scene didn't seem modest at all.

“Yuder, take care on your journey!”

“If any issues arise, call for me at any time. I’ll come running.”

Choosing to leave at dawn to avoid attracting attention, those who came to see them off were limited to the three Deputy Commanders and Alik Pelgin, the disciple of Thais Yulman. Amid the early morning gloom, Alik, shivering in the cold, sniveled as he handed something to Yuder.

“Eheh, t-take this. It’s medicine improved by both my master and the pharmacist of the Cavalry, as well as a prototype of an Awakener control device that I’ve tried making. Eheh.”

“You seem like you have a cold. Wouldn’t it have been better for you to stay with your master?”

At Kishiar’s teasing question, Alik gave a bitter smile.

“My master loves his morning sleep, you see. And he stayed up all night making medicine because of me, so what can be done about his fatigue?”

His shoulders, disciplined like those of a well-trained slave, seemed a bit lonely.

Yuder opened the cloth bag that Alik had given him and sneakily inspected the medicine and control device.

‘I saw the first prototype once… It was better than I expected.’

The heat period stabilizer for Awakeners who had manifested second genders, was a white tablet. It was developed by augmenting the medicine that Thais Yulman had already created. The first prototype had been tested on an Alpha Awakener who was experiencing a heat period and had consented. Remarkably, the

overpowering scent and abnormal arousal almost disappeared within a day of taking the medication.

The heat period itself took several more days to completely end, but the dramatic improvement of symptoms alone was an incredible feat. So, Thais Yulman had recently embarked on research for mass production of the second-generation prototype, and Yuder had asked for some samples in advance.

‘You never know what might happen.’

While the master was busy making medicine, Alik focused on researching the control device. His first prototype was a modified version of the necklace-type control device traditionally used by mages. At a glance, it looked like an ordinary accessory, a far more moderate and beautiful design compared to control devices from his past life, which resembled spiked shackles or dog collars.

The first prototype, built on the principles of control devices for mages, halved Alik’s power. Of course, it had no effect on Yuder, but Yuder thought it would be useful enough to ask for a few more before they left.

The intended users would not be him, but others they might encounter in the future.

“I did put in three more control devices since you asked… Next time, when I make the second prototype, I’ll make sure it’s more refined,” Alik said, his eyes still filled with disappointment that the control devices had no effect on Yuder.

“I promise to make something that will work on Yuder as well.”

“It looks like we can depart now.”

Nathan Zuckerman, who had just finished inspecting the horses, reported to Kishiar. All the luggage was already well-secured on the

horses.

Yuder mounted his horse and glanced at Kanna, Ever, and Steiber. They each waved, their faces full of resolve.

They didn’t leave the front of the Cavalry Headquarters until the three horses had disappeared from sight.

“Our first destination is Hartan, right?”

“Yes.”

The Eastern region, where a second batch of Cavalry recruitment was held and where a branch was simultaneously being established, was a place Yuder had already visited. The small village, which was the hometown of Devran and where Yuder first encountered Nahan, was conveniently located despite its underdevelopment.

It wasn’t far from Odequia, the central city and stronghold of the Diarca Family. There were also many fairly developed cities nearby. The reason the area hadn’t developed despite its favorable location was the rugged mountains and bandits. However, since the last incident, the bandits had disappeared, creating an opportunity for development. They heard that Zachlis Hartan, who went from being a provisional lord to a new lord, was taking advantage of the opportunity and putting a lot of effort into road construction.

It was a region where the lord was highly favorable toward the Cavalry and was well-located. It had plenty of space for buildings and significant potential for development.

It couldn’t have been better. The establishment of the Eastern branch was progressing faster than in any other region, except for the West, primarily because the Zachlis faction had readily agreed when asked in advance about the branch’s formation.

“How do you feel about going back?”

“I am a bit curious to see how much it has changed.”

The group moved smoothly, with no one struggling, making their journey remarkably fast. They arrived in Hartan earlier than expected, and what greeted them was a throng of people far more bustling than before.

“This is the place for recruiting Cavalry members, right?”

“Look over there. They’ve already started building the branch building!”

The once serene village, abundant with fields, now had a substantial inn and a fair number of respectable shops. The guards who were maintaining the roads throughout the town no longer had the same unfriendliness and laziness; their faces were taut with discipline.

Yuder stopped one of the guards and requested to be guided to where the lord was. The guard didn’t recognize the three individuals dressed in dark robes, but he instantly recognized the button Yuder extended, which was engraved with the Cavalry’s emblem.

“Welcome!”

Like a bolt of lightning, Zachlis Hartan rushed out from the castle where the lord resided, greeting them with a composed face.

“It’s an honor to see you again. The first dispatched members from the Cavalry are also staying in the castle, so you’ll be able to see them if you come with me. Please, follow me.”

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Chapter 599

Upon following Zachlis, Hartan's small fortress already had a few people who had emerged to greet them.

"Welcome!"

No sooner had Dermilla, Zachlis' fiance and Devran's only sister, greeted them with a bright smile than the men and women in familiar Cavalry uniforms burst into cheers.

"At last, the Commander has arrived!"

"Yuder!"

Among the throng, Yuder spotted young Jimmy, who was waving his hand excitedly. Yuder raised his hand to wave back.

Originally from the East, where his parents also lived, Jimmy had applied and had been impressively selected in this round of recruitment. Despite his young age, he was chosen due to his connection to the area and his unquestionable abilities. Although there were some who had their reservations, the reports thus far had shown no issues. Judging by his expression, it seemed he was doing very well.

'Strangely enough, he seems to have grown a bit taller since I last saw him.'

"Yep, I've grown taller! Can you see that my pants are shorter?"

Ah, indeed. Yuder pointed to the hem of his trousers and lightly tousled Jimmy's hair before being swallowed up in the chatter of his troops. Even though they had been sending reports daily, they had

so much to catch up on that it took quite some time before Yuder could finally unload his luggage in his room.

The room prepared for Kishiar was originally used by the castle's lord, while Nathan Zuckerman and Yuder were each given rooms next to it. Zachlis, who had surrendered his own room, seemed quite cheerful at the idea of using his wifes room on another floor. Apparently, he was happy for the chance to be closer to Dermilla, who had originally occupied the room.

"Um, Mr. Cavalry Commanders assistant… is my brother doing well? We often exchange letters, but it's different when he's far away. I can't help but worry."

After unpacking all his belongings, Yuder was cautiously approached by Dermilla. Considering her much-improved complexion compared to the last time he saw her at the trial of the Apeto family, there seemed to be no doubt that she was doing well with Zachlis.

"Yes, Devran is doing well. Actually, he asked me to deliver a gift and a letter to you when I get to the East. Here it is."

Yuder handed over a small envelope that he had previously received from Devran. Inside it was a slender, elegant silver necklace, along with a letter, all packaged in a thin silk pouch. Taking it out, Dermilla looked flustered and scratched her head.

"Oh, my brother! Asking busy people to do such things… I'm sorry. I'll tell him to send the gifts directly next time."

"No need to apologize. Devran has been a helpful colleague to me; delivering this is the least I can do. Rather than apologies, I would like to convey more of your gratitude to him."

His reply was so straightforward that it was devoid of any discernible emotion. However, this made Dermilla feel more relieved.

She smiled shyly and muttered softly, putting her heart into her words.

“Thank you. Truly.”

Yuder then asked her how her father was doing and what life was like back in Hartan since their return.

“My father is doing well. He has gotten much better since hes been living in a warmer place. Ever since the news arrived that the Cavalry did great service in the West, even the other members of Zachlis’ family and relatives have stopped opposing our relationship. People who behaved poorly towards us in the past have either apologized or act as if nothing happened, so life is good now.”

In the castle, Dermilla was recognized not merely as the fiance but practically as Lady Zachlis by the castle staff and the local populace. She had taken up all the responsibilities that would traditionally fall upon the Lord’s wife. While she initially struggled with these unfamiliar duties, her innate intelligence and wit quickly saw her through, allowing her to adapt.

Furthermore, now that Zachlis’s brother, Zakail, who had kidnapped her, had been fully subdued and punished, and her own brother Devran had received a surname, which was given to all members of the Cavalry, her social standing was no longer an issue.

Dermilla declared that she couldn’t be happier at the moment, free to be with Zachlis and surrounded by happiness. Her face bore no sign of deceit.

“I’m glad to hear that,” Yuder said. “But if you ever face difficulties in the future, don’t hesitate to reach out to either Devran or me.”

“Just hearing you say that is comforting. Thank you.”

“You’ll be responsible for an important part of the newly-forming eastern branch of the Cavalry. It’s only natural to offer support.”

Despite his serious tone, Dermilla somehow felt that Yuder’s words were partly intended to alleviate tension, almost like a light-hearted jest.

‘Well, it’s better if there’s no need to contact him for serious matters,’ she thought.

“Yuder,” called out Kishiar, appearing from an adjacent room as if he had just finished unpacking. Yuder excused himself from Dermilla and followed Kishiar.

The two immediately set about inspecting the construction site for the Cavalrys eastern branch and reviewed the ongoing work. They even discreetly observed the first round of tests taking place for new recruits. Most of the candidates were unfamiliar to Yuder, but a few displayed impressive abilities.

Kishiar watched the ongoing tests from a distance, glancing down at the paper in his hand. Thanks to his magic bracelet that altered his appearance, very few people knew who he was.

“So far, 284 people have passed the first round of the test… quite a number,” he commented.

“I don’t think our standards are unreasonably high, but there have been more exceptional individuals than anticipated,” Yuder replied.

Juan Larevo, who was officially leading the eastern first detachment, responded with great enthusiasm. A past roommate of Yuder, Juan belonged to the Shin Division.

“The second round of tests starts tomorrow.”

“Yes, that’s correct!”

“From then on, both my assistant and I will join the evaluation.”

“Understood. We’ll prepare the area for you.”

Juan had the ability to move incredibly fast for brief moments. Those who saw him use this power during the recruitment tests could not help but marvel at his skills.

“Look at that! How is he moving so quickly and yet still managing to do everything accurately? How is he controlling his power like that?”

“Is he trying to scare us off with that display? Showing us the level we have to reach to become a Cavalry member?”

His remarkable performancesupervising the recruitment tests, instantly assisting his comrades, and then in the blink of an eye, returning to Yuder and Kishiarwas undoubtedly the result of rigorous training within the Cavalry.

After completing their rounds, Yuder and Kishiar returned to Hartan Castle. Zachlis, who was busy giving orders to the servants, rushed over, curious about their observations.

“How were the places you’ve visited?”

“Everything is progressing in an orderly manner,” Yuder reported. “The road construction centering around the village is also going smoothly. Just keep going as you are.”

And so, it seemed that all was well in the realms of responsibility for each.

“It’s all thanks to the Dukes help,” Zachlis remarked.

“Help?”

He was aware that roadwork was ongoing in the village under Zachlis supervision, but had Kishiar ever had a role in that? Baffled by the new information, he blinked, just as Kishiar timely spoke up.

“What I did hardly qualifies as help. I merely responded to a letter from a young knight who unexpectedly found himself a lord, detailing his difficulties.”

“That’s not true. If it weren’t for your assistance, Duke, we wouldn’t have been able to make this much progress so quickly. You sent engineers from the capital to teach us the optimal road routes and construction methods utilizing Hartan’s geography. You even coached us on how to deal with stubborn bureaucrats.”

Listening to the conversation, it became clear that Kishiar had consistently corresponded with Zachlis since they first connected over the Apeto case, offering thoughtful responses to his concerns.

Zachlis, who had always intended to live his life as a knight, found himself faced with daunting challenges after inheriting the title of lord and siding with the Imperial faction. These ranged from dealing with regional resistance to addressing the village’s decline. It wasn’t his administrative talent, of which he had none, that had gotten him this far. It was Kishiar’s guidance and his own strong desire to live happily with Dermila.

‘…So, he has been helping with Hartan’s development all this while?’

Enhancing and protecting Hartan, now part of the Imperial faction, was a long-term benefit. Yet, he hadn’t expected Kishiar to have been so diligently attentive to them.

Yuder sighed deeply, feeling a strong beat in his chest, surprised by Kishiar’s unwavering commitment, even though he was already aware of Kishiar’s reputation for feeling like he lived each day as if it were three.

“No need to thank me as if it were a big deal,” Kishiar waved it off.

“I know you always say that, but since I’ve met you in person again, I really wanted to express my gratitude. Rest assured, I’ll take good care of you while you’re in the East.”

Zachlis said this with a smile. Although he still looked more like a knight than a lord, he seemed much more reliable than before.

“So, when have you been looking after the East?” Yuder asked.

“I wouldn’t say ‘looking after.’ I’ve just been responding. I haven’t done anything particularly noteworthy.”

A wry smile crept onto Kishiar’s face at Yuder’s comment as they entered the Lord’s conference room.

“Anyway, did anyone catch your eye during the first round of tests?”

“Well, I didn’t see anyone particularly noteworthy during my brief look. But the documents might reveal something.”

The reason Yuder had to come for the second round of recruitment was precisely this. Based on future knowledge, he intended to filter in or out individuals who would be either helpful or detrimental to the Cavalry.

‘No matter how carefully the other units have screened, there will be spies deliberately planted somewhere. On the other hand, there will also be capable people who failed to join the Cavalry and diverted elsewhere…’

Yuder glanced at the piles of documents filling the room. Though significantly fewer than in the capital, the volume was still considerable.

However, the thought of backing down didn’t even cross his mind. As he picked up a stack of documents, Kishiar too grabbed a pile and placed it in front of him.

“Looks like we’re diving right into work again. I should tell Nathan to bring us something tasty.”

“I’ve already brought some.”

Before he could say there was no need, the door opened, and Nathan Zuckerman appeared, carrying a tray. He had disappeared right after unloading the luggage, so Yuder had wondered where he had gone. Clearly, the man had been busy in his own right.

“As expected, you’re an excellent adjutant, Nathan.”

“Your Grace seems happier when I bring you tea and pastries than when I wield a sword.”

“That’s only natural. A sword isn’t of much use in everyday life.”

“…”

Yuder cast a grateful glance at Nathan, then began to rapidly shuffle through the papers in front of him.

After pulling an all-nighter, Yuder finally managed to sort through dozens of promising applications.

This feat was achieved after Nathan Zuckerman had delivered sixteen trays of snacks and twenty-three cups of tea.

“Are you done?”

Kishiar, who had finished reviewing the papers before Yuder, gently asked as their eyes met. Yuder ran his fingers through his slightly disheveled hair and took a deep breath.

“Yes. Those on the right are either long-standing members of the Cavalry or individuals with notable abilities. Those on the left are people we should keep a close eye on. Even if they fail, we need to monitor their movements continuously.”

People can change dramatically depending on circumstances. However, some stay on the same path no matter how much their circumstances change.

It wasn’t easy to categorize people solely based on memories of their past and future actions. But Yuder took some comfort in knowing that this time, Kishiar’s judgement would also be at play.

Even if Yuder made a wrong call, Kishiar would be there to back him up. This allowed them to assess people without bias influenced by information.

“You’ve worked hard. How about catching some sleep before the second round of tests this afternoon?”

Kishiar massaged the back of Yuder’s neck as he suggested this. Yuder started to shake his head, but as Kishiar’s hands touched him, a wave of exhaustion swept over him, causing him to hesitantly nod.

“Alright. But, Commander, you should rest as well.”

“Of course, I should.”

With a face that betrayed no fatigue, the man smiled.

Adjoined to the meeting room was a spacious bedroom, designed for those who needed to rest while working. Yuder lay down next to Kishiar, closed his eyes, and fell asleep before he could even exhale.

However, when he awoke, it was to a chilling cold.

‘…What is this?’

For a moment after waking, he couldn’t quite grasp the situation, his mind still foggy.

After blinking a few times, he remembered why he was there and what he had been doing before he fell asleep. Instinctively, he turned his head to check the spot next to him; it was empty.

‘…Where is Kishiar?’

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Chapter 600

‘Kishiar is’

Yuder rose from his seat and went outside.

Unlike the dimly lit makeshift bedroom, the sun still shone through the large window of the conference room. This meant he hadnt been asleep for long.

Kishiar was also there, engrossed in something.

It certainly wasnt the mountain of paperwork piled up. Yuder moved a bit closer to discover that Kishiar was focused on an old strategy board game. He wasn’t playing alone; all the game pieces were set on the hexagonal board as if ready for play. Kishiars gaze seemed lost in some profound thought.

“Commander?”

“Hm?”

Kishiar finally turned his head. How deeply must he have been lost in thought to not even notice the presence of someone who would usually catch his attention even from a distance?

Yuder carefully concealed his rising curiosity and shifted his gaze to the strategy board game Kishiar had been observing.

“What were you doing?”

“Hm… I woke up not too tired and had nothing to do, so I was exploring around here when I found this,” Kishiar said, gesturing to the worn-out board with a smile.

“It reminded me of the beginner set I first used when I learned to play strategy games. Its likely that the same craftsman made both; mine was made in an eastern workshop as well. It was lost before I moved to Peletta, so seeing this brought back memories.”

The beginner set wasnt vastly different from what he’d used before. The pieces were just smaller, lighter, and more colorful. Though the vibrant colors on this particular board had faded with time, Yuder’s gaze was inexplicably drawn to it just knowing that it resembled what Kishiar had used in his youth.

“Would you like to ask Zachlis to give it to you? It seems to be unused; he might not mind parting with it.”

“No, that wont be necessary. Its not something I need right now,” Kishiar mumbled as he fiddled with one of the game pieces.

“It just reminded me of when I first learned to play.”

When Kishiar first learned to play strategy games, it must have been when he was very young.

Yuder wondered how old he might have been. Was he so young that even holding those small pieces was a challenge? Or perhaps

A portrait of young Kishiar in the Imperial Palace fleetingly came to Yuders mind. Perhaps because hed seen the real-life image, he could easily imagine the boy with angelic golden locks sitting in front of a strategy board game.

‘I was quite frustrated when I had to learn such things,’ Yuder thought.

But Kishiar was likely different, enjoying the challenge because that was his nature.

As Yuder vaguely imagined this, the chill he felt when he woke up dissipated, replaced by a warm feeling filling his heart. Yuders eyes softened, prompting Kishiar to rise from his seat and cover the board game.

“Well, Juan will be here soon. Shall we go and observe the second test?”

He naturally picked up the coat that Yuder had laid aside. Despite Yuder’s protests that it was unnecessary, Kishiar skillfully helped him put it on. Then, as if asking for a token of gratitude, he planted a kiss near Yuders temple. He was the same playful Kishiar as always; nothing seemed different at all.

What was the issue with him simply wanting to enjoy a strategy game, reminiscent of the old days? Especially when he was about to go through his first proper heat period, which was affecting his behavior in subtle ways. That should be the bigger concern here.

Yuder thought that far before leaving the meeting room with Kishiar.

…But maybe he shouldn’t have.

“As expected of Yuder Aile… As soon as you step in, the applicants’ true abilities are revealed and their real intentions are exposed. How fortunate it was that it wasn’t me.”

“Wait, how did you even catch that guy who was trying to cheat by secretly hiring another Awakener to take the test? You all saw it, right? Everyone was surprised, except for the Commander.”

“Oh, we saw it. Had a hard time managing my expression, pretending like I knew what was going on, just like the Commander.”

“Don’t you guys know? I heard Yuder used to be a mercenary before he joined our group. That’s why he can see through most

deceptions.”

“Really?”

“No way. I heard he was a disciple taught the art of the sword by a master swordsman who hid his true identity.”

“What are you talking about? Wasn’t he the disciple of a mad mage living in some mountain valley? And isn’t that mage related to the bearded mage currently at the Cavalry headquarters?”

I’m sorry, but none of that is true.

Yuder looked at the Cavalry members animatedly discussing him and wondered when they would finally stop gossiping.

“Is it… is it true? Is Yuder really like that?”

‘…If I let this go on, Jimmy will probably believe everything they’re saying.’

“Enough, all of you. Wasn’t there enough training this morning?”

As Yuder approached them quietly and spoke, all the members shuddered. Faces turned to him with forced smiles.

“Huh, Yuder! What do you mean, not enough training this morning?”

“It feels like everyone’s stamina has improved since we came to the East, but our training hasn’t caught up. Feels like we have too much leftover energy.”

“What are you talking about? Can’t you see we can barely move? Only Jimmy and you are up and walking!”

“That’s right! How can you say such nonsense? We’re already pushing our limits just by not skipping training while working!”

“Well, if you don’t like it, then don’t do it. The capital side has already increased their training level.”

Training may be torturous, but lagging behind others is even more unbearable.

Years of indoctrination and training had conditioned the members to react incredibly fast to such competitiveness.

“What? The capital side already elevated their training level?”

“Then it’s a different story. Tell us, too!”

“We can’t afford to be inferior to those in the capital next time we meet!”

He knew they would react like that. Such naivet.

Yuder handed Jimmy a new training schedule that their counterparts in the capital were probably grinding through as they spoke. Jimmy’s eyes lit up as he quickly read through it.

“Wow! This is amazing! They’ve added twice the amount of strength and flexibility training to the basic regimen, and also specialized advanced training based on individual skills! I’ll practice swinging my sword with a rock attached to it without dropping it while repeating the training manual! This is exciting!”

The training requirements had gotten significantly more difficult, and while Jimmy was excited like a puppy, the faces of the rest of the members turned a shade of green.

“Wh…what is this? Is this really meant for humans to do? It’s not like something out of an exaggerated knight novel, is it?”

“Yuder, don’t lie! How could those guys in the capital possibly do this?”

“You told me you couldn’t do it before, but now you can do everything.”

“Well…! Yes, but! Darn it! Even so!”

“Enough whining. Don’t forget the list I gave you yesterday, and train as diligently as always.”

“Uh… Wait, where are you going?”

It was then that the members finally sensed the unusual atmosphere surrounding Yuder and awkwardly looked around. Yuder was already fully prepared to leave, dressed even in the robe he’d worn when he first arrived at Hartan.

“That’s right, I’m leaving. My work in the East is done.”

“What? What about the Commander?”

“He said to understand that he has to leave quietly due to the situation. I came here just to deliver the training schedule.”

“No way, this soon…”

Though they couldn’t hide their surprise, the members soon nodded in agreement. Jimmy, unable to conceal his disappointment, stood and tightly hugged Yuder.

“I wanted to spar with you a bit more! My parents are planning to move their business base to Hartan, so they wanted to meet you if possible…”

“We can meet next time.”

“Alright… I’m going back to the capital anyway… Uh, but, brother.”

While hugging Yuder, Jimmy suddenly lifted his head as if sensing something. A confused boy, rubbing his head against Yuder's chest, whispered softly into Yuder's ear.

"I smell something from you. Are you not feeling well?"

"…"

It seemed the scent had intensified, not just in moments of heightened emotion, but in general. Yuder immediately masked the scent and frowned.

"It's nothing. Don't worry about it."

"It's not nothing… I'm pretty sure it's something…"

Even though he was still young, Jimmy seemed to be an Alpha who had remarkably keen scent detection. It was incredibly strange to have someone detect his scent, but Yuder supposed it was something he'd have to get used to. Confused by Jimmy's abrupt behavior, the other members watched as Yuder calmly bid them farewell.

"Then, I'm leaving. Report any problems, and I'll see you later."

"Uh, yeah. Take care!"

"There might not be any great monsters or bandits to ambush you on your journey… but still, be careful!"

As Yuder moved away from them toward the back gate of Hartan Castle, he saw Kishiar, Nathan Zuckerman, Zachlis, and Dermila already mounted on their horses.

"Did you say your goodbyes?"

"Yes."

Kishiar smiled.

“It’s regrettable to send you off so quietly… But time is of the essence. We’ve included some rations and items useful for night travel in your baggage. Please accept them.”

Zachlis and Dermila had sent the servants away, insisting on bidding him farewell personally. Yuder accepted the small package from Dermila without hesitation and briefly conveyed his thanks.

“Thank you.”

“May you remain healthy until we meet again!”

The task of recruiting members in the East, which had posed no great challenges, was swiftly concluded.

Their next destination was the West.

“Greetings, Commander! I am now the official Western Branch Leader, not just an interim oneEmun Philang!”

The West was already an established branch, requiring less attention than the East. The familiar faces in the West greeted them warmly and treated them with as much care as Zachlis had.

They had assessed the situation of the Western pioneers, who gathered in numbers second only to the capital. They heard stories of the Awakeners, previously affiliated with the Star of Nagran, who had been remarkably silent in their activities in the West. Time had flown as they met with Marty and Robel, and heard about the cleanup from previous incidents.

And so it was that Yuder, who had gone to sleep in the modest mansion of Baron Koelt, the new lord of Tainu, abruptly woke up. His eyes shot open, gripped by an unidentifiable cold sensation that seemed to come out of nowhere.

”

What could it have been? He tried to grasp the sensation, rubbing his head, but it remained elusive.

Hesitant, he stepped out of his room, only to find that Kishiar’s room light was on, despite the late hour.

“…Commander.”

He knocked on the door, and soon after, a man appeared, clad in nightclothes and sporting a smile.

“Hmm? What brings you here at this hour? Can’t sleep?”

“Why aren’t you sleeping, Commander?”

“It’s customary to have a drink on such a moonlit night.”

Yuder sensed the jest, though he didn’t fully understand the comment. His gaze shifted beyond Kishiar’s shoulder to the table behind him, where a bottle and glass were set. Apparently, Kishiar really had been drinking alone.

‘…Wait a minute.’

“Have you also been playing a strategy game by yourself?”

Yuder’s eyes narrowed as he spotted a strategy board game next to the glass. At his question, Kishiar turned his head and glanced behind him.

“Well, it helps me sort out my thoughts when I have nothing to do? Baron Koelt seems to love these games; he has one in every room. Isnt there one in your room as well?”

That was true. Yuder recalled hearing that during dinner, and he remembered that indeed, there was a game board among the

amenities for guests in a corner of his room.

Yuder had no particular interest in it; he had merely given it a glance and moved on. But it wasn't strange that the man before him felt differently.

Still, something felt odd.

'Something feels off.'

Seeing Yuder simply gaze at him, a slightly puzzled smile crept onto Kishiar's face.

"Thought I might have been up to something else?"

"You seem to be sleeping too little."

"Your concern always warms my heart in a way nothing else can, but look at me. Does this look like the face of someone who's sleep-deprived?"

He had a point. Thanks to his drinking, Kishiar's complexion was even better than usual. He looked like a tempter who had the night at his fingertips. Unlike times when hed lost sleep before, his skin didn't lack luster nor did shadows linger under his eyes.

However, the unsettling feeling did not dissipate. Why was that?

"Hmm… perhaps as the time approaches, your senses are becoming more acute. It happens. I've experienced a few heat periods since my Awakening, and they were not always pleasant."

Kishiar, who had been scrutinizing Yuder's face, sighed softly, opened the door wider, and gracefully gestured for him to come in.

"Come in, the hallway is too cold to stand barefoot. Would you like to join me for a drink?"

Drinking would have no effect on Yuder, but he thought that spending time together might clarify this strange mood. So, he accepted the invitation.

Yet, as soon as they entered, Kishiar naturally began to put away the strategy board. Throughout their late-night conversation, there were no peculiar comments.

Kishiar kept Yuder entertained with all kinds of amusing stories, even managing to coax a faint smile out of him. He seemed pleased with himself for doing so.

Yes, he seemed pleased. At least, that’s how it appeared.

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Chapter 601

Something’s off it’s bothering me.

Yuder Aile generally trusted his instincts when he felt something was amiss.

While often indifferent, he possessed a keen sense in specific areas, almost like an animal’s instinct. This was especially true when it came to recognizing imminent dangers, gauging an opponent’s strength, or discerning the growth potential of those around him who should be nurtured.

However, Yuder, who was usually swift to act based on these instincts, found it hard to rely on them when it came to Kishiar La Orr.

And for good reasonthe instincts that alarmed him this time were triggered merely by a strange chill he felt when waking up a few times and noticing that Kishiar had been playing strategy games more frequently than before. Other than that, there seemed to be no reason for concern, leaving no room for doubt.

The chill that startled him awake could simply be due to Yuder’s body entering a certain biological phase. As for the strategy games, Kishiar had recently played a memorable match, so it wasn’t entirely strange that he was more focused on them.

Yet, despite all rational explanations, an inexplicable feeling gnawed at Yuder’s senses whenever he tried to dismiss it. That was the problem.

Something was nagging at him, and he couldn’t figure out what it was.

Logically speaking, there shouldn’t be any issues. But what if there’s a possibility, however slim, that I’m missing something?

He would rather be overly sensitive than negligent. The chances of there being no problem were 99%, but Yuder was troubled by that remaining 1%. It was inevitable because the person involved was Kishiar.

Yuder didn’t want to overlook even a moment’s strangeness, not because he remembered Kishiar’s unexplained disappearance in his past life.

Quite the opposite, actually.

The more Yuder knew about Kishiar, the more a minor oddity would raise his hackles. It was genuinely strange.

I still can’t pinpoint what exactly feels off. So, the only thing I can do now is

He continued to observe Kishiar, scanning the surroundings. Others in the vicinity were also included in this scrutiny.

“Hmm? Something different about the Dukeor should I say, Commander? I honestly can’t tell.”

Marty, who had come for a private meeting with Yuder to discuss business, tilted her head in confusion.

“I’ve always heard you’re a bit unusual so I can’t really say if anything’s changed since the last time I saw you. Oh! Did you perhaps get a haircut?”

Robel, who stood beside her, chimed in, subtly rolling his eyes. Although he couched his words, they seemed to suggest that it was difficult to discern any strangeness now when the individual was already known to be peculiar.

“No, never mind. Let’s get back to the matter at hand.”

“Ah, yes.”

Robel quickly handed Yuder a letter he had been holding. It was a letter sent just yesterday by one of Robels colleagues stationed at a key location in the south, at the base of the Star of Nagran.

“Out of those at the southern base, a total of 23 have expressed a clear desire to apply for the new unit and branch staff positions. Most of them are people who have stayed at the western base. As of the time this letter was sent, some have already made plans to leave the base in groups. They will head to the nearest southern city to apply.”

“Wouldn’t it be risky if they get caught?”

“Well, it’s possible, but I’ve heard that lately the atmosphere among them hasn’t been good. Some people are even leaving the base. It seems they’re just going through the motions.”

How bad could it be? Yuder quickly skimmed through the letter Robel had handed him, finding the answer almost immediately.

“- The mood is sour because Sera hasn’t received a response to her letter to the sage for a long time. After a lengthy meeting, they sent another, but in the meantime, a few more have left, saying they might start a fight. I’ve been doing as you suggested, poking at the nervous ones to see if they’re thinking of leaving. Meanwhile, many of those who followed Nahan have become friendly with Southern merchants”

Yuder would bet money that the unanswered letter to the sage was the one intercepted by the Eldore siblings and Gakane, which had spurred their burglaries.

It seems that because we intercepted the letter, the information about the Southern merchants hasn't properly reached the sage's side yet.

Taking advantage of the confusion among them, Robel had played his role well. Yuder readily offered him praise.

"Good work. We welcome any support for those who just want to live ordinary lives. Please continue."

"Yes, of course."

According to Robel, he hadn't been able to find out the exact locations of the Southern base and other bases due to his former colleagues' extreme caution.

"The Southern base's location has changed since my time there. It's now in a desert, and they're using powers to hide the entrance, which changes often. This letter went through several channels just to reach here, so anything more would be"

"It's better not to ask questions that might raise suspicion. Knowing how many people are thinking of leaving is more important than their exact location, so don't push yourself."

"Yes."

Yuder scanned Robel's smiling face. Even Robel, so diligent and well-disposed toward the Cavalry, still had no idea what the 'sage's ability' was.

That was separate from his faith in the Cavalry; he frequently interacted with other Awakeners who had yet to break free from the sage's indoctrination.

'That damned brainwashing ability.'

Simplistic, but for that reason, powerful and persistent. Nevertheless, Yuder wasn't anxious; he knew that with time, they would find a way to break it.

'Kishiar is more of a concern at the moment.'

From the perspective of people like Marty and Robel, Kishiar seemed no different from before. The next target should be someone who knew him well.

Just as Yuder was contemplating this, he raised his eyes to find the two people still there, seemingly having said all they had to say.

"Is there anything else you'd like to discuss?"

"No, it's just… actually, I had a favor to ask you for the next time we meet. It seemed like a good time now"

A favor? Any simple favor could be handled by other members in the Western branch. What could this favor be that he had to wait to meet him again to ask?

Yuder nodded, giving Robel permission to speak. Robel's face flushed.

"Uh I heard that the assistant to the Commander of the Cavalry is responsible for planning and supervising all training within the Cavalry. Is that correct?"

'Ah, so that's it.'

"Yes, more or less."

"Strictly speaking, we may not be considered members, but we're still working for the Cavalry at the branch, right? I was wondering if there's a way to get separate training for the abilities we possess, so they could be put to better use in the future."

“If you’re looking for systematic training, wouldn’t it be better to join as a member of the second round of recruitment this time?”

“No, I don’t want to be a member. I’m not particularly proud of my powers.”

Marty frowned visibly at her response.

“However, I’ve heard from many members who were able to develop their abilities in unexpected ways and found it easier to control their powers after receiving training from the Commander’s assistants. I understand when they say that not using my power isn’t the only answer for me. If I could have that opportunity, I would like to give it a try.”

For someone who had said she wanted to get rid of her awakened abilities due to nearly being killed by betrayal from other Awakeners, this was a quite a radical statement.

Realizing that her time in the Western Branch had been good for her in some way made Yuder feel better. He thought, ‘Whatever the reason, it always comes down to Kishiar, doesn’t it?’

Yuder let out a small sigh and nodded.

“Exactly, not using an awakened ability isn’t the answer to everything. An uncontrollable ability can activate unintentionally and cause confusion.”

“You’re right. My ability is particularly like that, and I want to correct it.”

Marty’s ability was to temporarily steal the energy from those she touched. Thinking of Robel, the person who would be in contact with her most often, it wasn’t hard to guess why she was motivated this way.

“Understood. While it’s not to the level of the members, I can teach you a few useful training techniques. And”

As he was speaking, an item that could be helpful in this situation popped into Yuder’s mind.

“If it’s alright, I’d like to offer you an item that will assist you until you achieve the desired results from your training.”

“Is there such a thing? What is it?”

“It’s an Awakener Control Device.”

“A Control Device?”

“What is that? The name sounds a bit scary.”

Seeing the apprehensive faces, Yuder explained in detail what the Control Device was. Though it was still a prototype and wouldn’t completely inhibit abilities, Marty eagerly accepted it, convinced that it would help her prevent accidental activations.

“It’s amazing that such a thing exists! Thank you. Now people who come into contact with me won’t suddenly faint or stumble. I’m glad.”

“If you could, please let me know how effective it is over time.”

“Of course!”

Yuder handed over one of the Control Devices he had brought with him. As he was watching their retreating figures, a voice called out from behind him.

“I thought you brought that thing for the prisoners here, but it turns out that wasn’t the case.”

The voice belonged to Nathan Zuckerman, the next person Yuder had planned to visit.

‘Well, that saves me the effort of searching for him.’

Yuder turned his head. The Southern knight was holding a box that looked familiar.

“That is”

“It’s a task from the Duke. As always, for his tea time.”

Indeed, what he was carrying were the same snacks they had had when they were last in the West. The knight looked unfazed doing such a trivial task. His dignified demeanor of doing what had to be done left Yuder with nothing to say.

Instead of mentioning the box of snacks, Yuder decided to answer the question Nathan had posed.

“I thought it best to give it first to the one who needed it most since there are only a few of these items available now.”

“Urgency, is it? I see.”

Ordinarily, one would assume that prisoners should be given top priority. However, by Yuder’s standards, Marty wasn’t far behind in terms of importance.

“More importantly, may I have a moment to speak with you? I’ve been looking for Sir Zuckerman.”

“What is it?”

“I have questions related to the Commander.”

Beneath Nathan Zuckerman’s stern forehead, his eyes blinked as if trying to gauge Yuder’s sincerity. A moment later, without another

word, he changed his direction to follow Yuder. It was a surprisingly quick decision, dispelling any notion that he might decline due to being busy.

“Do you have any issues with the Duke?”

“That’s exactly the question I wish to ask you, Sir Zuckerman.”

“Pardon?”

How could he even begin to explain this? It felt quite challenging, given that he had hardly ever brought up such a topic with others.

However, Nathan Zuckerman was Kishiar’s most loyal subordinate, the one who had observed him the longest. If even he was unaware of Kishiar’s anomalies, it was better to assume that no one else knew either.

After a moment of silent contemplation, Yuder slowly opened his mouth.

“The Commander is without any issues, I assume. He’ll be competently performing his duties today as usual.”

””

“However, I’ve been feeling that something seems strangely off for some time now.”

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Chapter 602

“However, I’ve been feeling that something seems strangely off for some time now.”

Feeling something was strangeit was a statement too vague to describe in detail, yet Nathan Zuckerman didn’t ask Yuder what exactly he meant. He didn’t even ask for a more detailed explanation.

Instead, he looked at Yuder thoughtfully for a long moment before asking just one question.

“When did you start feeling this way?”

When indeed? Yuder’s memory started to rewind like a flying arrowpassing today, bypassing yesterday, and moving even further back in time.

“I’m not quite sure. I started becoming uneasy after I left the capital, I think…”

It was around that time that Yuder woke up sensing an unusual chill in Kishiar’s absence. But then again, he had noticed Kishiar keeping a strategy game board by his side even before that. And he hadn’t found it strange from the time he began paying attention to it…

“…Actually, subtle changes I hadn’t noticed before seem to have been present even earlier.”

Yuder sighed deeply as he met Nathan Zuckerman’s gaze.

“I think it started after I took your advice, Sir Zuckerman, and had a conversation with the commander.”

Yes, it had started the day they played a strategy game together. Kishiar had kept that board in his office ever since.

“…”

“At first, I didn’t think it was strange. Even now, I wonder if I’m just being overly anxious. However…”

“Hmm. I don’t think that’s the case,” Nathan Zuckerman replied swiftly.

“If Sir Yuder thinks something is off, then something must be there.”

“Do you feel the same, Sir Zuckerman?”

“No.”

The answer came back so fast it was almost disconcerting.

From my perspective, there hasnt been much difference from usual.

“Even though he’s been keeping the strategy game board by his side more often?”

“He did that at times when we were in Peletta too. When he had a particularly engaging match or faced a challenging problem, he would keep the board next to him for days, even during meals.”

“Then why did you say what you just did?”

“Just because I don’t find it strange doesn’t mean you have to feel the same way.”

“…”

“Isn’t that how you feel?”

Those calmly spoken words brought Yuder's thoughts to a sudden halt.

"As far as I've observed, if Sir Yuder suspects something odd about the Commander, it's worth considering, even if there's no immediate reason to believe it. You know him better than anyone, don't you?"

It was strange. Nathan Zuckerman had always insisted on keeping a watchful eye on Yuder to protect Kishiar. But now, his words seemed to suggest the opposite.

However, his deep navy blue eyes displayed no wavering, as if stating an obvious truth. Somewhat flustered, Yuder murmured,

"Me, know him better?"

"If you don't think so, then that would be surprising."

"It's odd for me to say that I know the commander better when you are here, Sir Zuckerman."

"Well, knowing someone isn't simply a matter of time spent together. There are knights who have practiced swordsmanship for 20 years but know less about the sword than those who've trained for just one year, aren't there?"

The knight, who had given a response likely to raise the ire of anyone like Kiolle da Diarca, let out a contemplative hum. Moments later, he gestured with a box of sweets he had set aside during their conversation.

"It might be a bit odd to continue our conversation in this corner. Would you care to have some tea in my room?"

Life had led to this: sitting in Nathan Zuckerman's room, discussing matters about Kishiar over tea. Yuder sat in a neatly

arranged guest room, which was identical in layout to the one he had been given. He looked down at the cup of tea and sweets that Nathan had offered. Although skeptical about immediately consuming the sweets that had been purchased on Kishiar's orders, he figured it didn't matter much to Kishiar. Yuder shrugged it off.

"Let's get to the point," Yuder said, raising his cup to his lips.

The knight opened his mouth promptly after glancing at Yuder sipping his tea.

"You may find it strange, but I can't say that I know everything about my lord."

"Haven't you served him since you were children?"

"Technically, since I was nine. His Highness, the Second Prince, took me in when he visited the southern palace to escape the summer heat. I was a lowly servant who couldn't even wash his feet properly at the time."

Yuder thought back; he had seen Nathan Zuckerman's face quite often in his previous life. This loyal knight had helped clean up the mess following the manifestation of his second gender, and there had even been a one-on-one duel between them when he had defied Kishiar.

'A significant incident where both of us ended up wounded, and I discovered that Nathan Zuckerman was a hidden Swordmaster.'

But he had never heard this level of detail before.

Perhaps Nathan was sharing a past he'd rather not talk about, but his voice showed no sign of hesitation.

"From a servant to a personal attendant, then eventually becoming the closest chief attendant and his sword disciple. After

moving to Peletta, I served as his adjutant. However, serving someone so closely means that you have to willingly turn a blind eye to some aspects of their life.”

The knight paused, his gaze seemingly probing the distant horizon as it got lost in the pale-red tea before him.

“I couldn’t do anything to alleviate his greatest pain, and when he faced death, all I could do was fend off everyone in the castle, as per his wishes. That was the limit imposed on me.”

”””

“But you don’t have to do that. You can do anything.”

Those words sounded somewhat similar to what he had said to Yuder earlier about Kishiar, who had borrowed a few banned books. It was as if Nathan felt Yuder knew everything there was to know, not only about the Cavalry and the Knights of Peletta but also about Nathan himself, Kishiar, and others.

However, what was different now was the absence of the complicated look and inner turmoil that Nathan usually showed when he looked at Yuder.

After a moment of contemplation, Yuder asked, “But what if acting without certainty leads to unfavorable consequences for the Commander?”

The knight’s eyes narrowed slightly.

“It’s somewhat surprising to hear such a thing from you, Sir Aile.”

“What’s so strange about it?”

“Nothing. Well, in any case, if you think something should be done, don’t ask me. Just do as you see fit. I doubt that anything you

do would result in unfavorable outcomes for my lord.”

…

Nathan Zuckerman’s unexpected words left Yuder feeling odd. The strangeness magnified when considering their relationship in a previous life.

“If you need my help in this matter, I’ll listen first and assist where I can. I do owe you a great debt, after all.”

Yuder remained silent for a long while. A sense of uncertainty, like a fleeting mirage, slowly began to coalesce and settle in his chest.

Throughout the long pause as Yuder gathered his thoughts, Nathan Zuckerman silently sipped his tea, patiently waiting for a response.

That respectful distance finally gave Yuder the assurance he needed.

‘Perhaps this current turmoil is due to Kishiar hiding something from me. Once I uncover it, everything will end.’

Yuder downed the lukewarm tea in a single gulp, looked at the now-empty cup that had somehow gone unnoticed, and nodded.

“Thank you for your advice. I’ll handle it from here.”

“Yes.”

“But I have one question. What do you think is the most likely reason for Kishiar acting normal, even hiding his true intentions from both of us?”

“I’m not certain if this will suffice as an answer,” Nathan Zuckerman’s weighty voice filled the room, “but from what I know,

when my lord hides something while maintaining an appearance of calm, it is usually because he finds it difficult to control himself.”

Difficult to control himself.

The myriad implications of those words brushed Yuder’s mind like a flash of light.

Kishiar was a generous and considerate man, but Yuder knew there was one aspect in which he became utterly unyielding: it was Kishiar himself.

“Understood. Thank you.”

With a nod to Nathan Zuckerman, Yuder left the room.

“Next! Applicant number 439, Seeker!”

One of the applicants for the second round of recruitment of Cavalry in the west stepped forward. As the robust young man let out a shout, his leg muscles explosively swelled.

“Huah!”

With a stomp, his body soared high into the sky. Those watching let out exclamations of admiration.

“Woah”

Moments later, the young man landed back on the ground, creating a large indentation with the sheer force of his landing. He was an exceptional Awakener, able to jump as high as a fortress wall just by using the strength of his legs alone.

‘But if we hire that guy, within a year, he will quit and we’ll find out he’s a spy sent from the aristocratic faction. Acting like a sincere fellow, he would have taken a year’s worth of information and fled.’

Yuder, observing the man with a chilly gaze, swiftly drew a line through the name written on the paper before him. Seeker would not be joining the Cavalry this time.

Kishiar, sitting beside him, quietly muttered, “Another rejection, huh.”

“Yes.”

“There are more failing here than in the East.”

“If you find it regrettable, you could pass him.”

“As if I would do that.”

A smile appeared at the corner of Kishiar’s mouth. Yuder studied that bright smile a little longer, and more closely, than usual.

Since the night they had drunk alcohol while playing a strategy game at Baron Koelt’s residence, Kishiar hadn’t repeated the same activity. Whether Kishiar’s behavior was intentional, knowing that Yuder felt something was amiss, Yuder couldn’t tell. Regardless, he hadn’t found the opportunity to ask.

No, at this point, it’s safe to say it was intentional.

From morning, there had been about three instances where Kishiar would skillfully interrupt or make light of the situation whenever Yuder tried to look at him too long or speak earnestly. Kishiar was a master of subtle rhetoric, so subtle that even Yuder had a hard time picking up on it.

See, even now

“Why are you staring at me for so long? I doubt you find this changed face more appealing than my usual one.”

Kishiar turned his head, catching Yuder's gaze, and narrowed his eyes.

"…Your hair got disheveled when the applicant shook the ground just now."

"Really? I didn't notice."

Kishiar combed his hair a few times nonchalantly and then bent his head down with unabashed confidence, asking Yuder to fix it for him. Hesitant for a moment, Yuder reached out and touched his now ordinary brown hair. Despite appearing rough to the eye, the texture felt as smooth as usual under his fingers.

As he straightened Kishiar's hair, Yuder found himself realizing just how vulnerable he had become to the man.

That's why I even went to consult with Nathan Zuckerman.

Not wanting to act without certainty meant not wanting to cause Kishiar even a sliver of pain due to his own miscalculations. He didn't want to see the man suffer any further because of him.

The only thing that could make Yuder feel that way was Kishiar alone.

"I'm disqualified? Why? What am I lacking?"

Just then, the shout of an applicant who had been told he was disqualified filled the air. Every stomp he made shook the ground as if it would crumble, causing the area where they sat to sway wildly. Screams of terror tore through the air.

Frowning, Yuder raised his hand.

The wind and earth obeyed him, moving fluidly to align with his will.

“Argh!”

Caught in a sudden gust of wind full of dirt, the rampaging applicant covered his face and rolled on the ground. The once unstable terrain instantly stabilized. Sensing the immense power behind the movement, the Awakeners all turned their heads toward Yuder.

In their gazes filled with both fear and awe, Yuder stood up slowly and addressed the rejected applicant.

“People like you who only rely on your own strength and run wild have no place in the Cavalry. Make sure you pass that message on to those who come after you.”

“Wh-what…?”

“Get lost.”

“Argh!”

With a flick of Yuder’s wrist, the man was swept up in a gust of wind and sent flying over the wall. As his screams grew fainter in the distance, so did the attention of those who had been watching.

“…”

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Chapter 603

After smoothly eliminating one troublesome candidate, the rest of the test proceeded in a rather solemn atmosphere. No one else dared to make a fuss over their disqualification notices.

However, the atmosphere surrounding the testing area had completely transformed.

The candidates who had originally come to take the exam had not paid much attention to the two judges sitting in the corner of the room. The judges were known to be existing members of the Cavalry, but they had deliberately concealed their names and their appearance was sufficiently nondescript.

But as it turned out, one of them was none other than the famous Yuder Aile.

“Good heavens! The very man who rose from a commoner to receive a baronetcy from the Emperor was here and not in the capital?”

“I’ve never seen anyone handle such colossal power so effortlessly. If it isn’t Yuder Aile, who single-handedly demolished half of the Great Sarain Forest, who else could wield such power?”

“That’s a terrifying force. And to think that he’s not even a Deputy Commander but just an assistant to the Cavalry Commander Can I really join this Cavalry?”

Wind and earth. It was already a remarkable feat to wield these two arduous natural elements at once, yet he managed it all while preventing anyone nearby from interfering.

After effortlessly sending a candidate flying, not a bead of sweat appeared on his face as he returned to his seat. His demeanor reminded people of a predator guarding its territory. Those who felt pricked by his aura couldn't help but get goosebumps, while others looked on in awe.

Unsurprisingly, after the day's testing was over, numerous Awakeners flocked towards the judge's seat where Yuder had been sitting.

But Yuder was already gone.

"Huh? He's not here…"

"He was definitely sitting here just a moment ago; where did he go?"

"…"

"Everyone looks disappointed. Shouldn't we go down and chat a bit?"

While candidates wandered around the judge's area with glum faces or sought out other Cavalry members they had tested with, Yuder was watching them from high up in the sky.

Despite floating in the sky, not a single gust of wind stirred around him, and he seemed as stable as if he were standing on the ground. Had his floating been powered by the wind, it would have been difficult to remain so steadfast and tranquil.

'And ascending this quickly without anyone noticing would've been difficult as well.'

The force that had shot him up into the sky as soon as he had risen from his seat was all thanks to Kishiar, whose hand he was currently holding.

Yuder turned his head toward the man who must still be exerting a considerable force to keep them afloat.

“If we go down now, people will become curious about your identity as well, Commander.”

“That’s a valid point.”

Despite exerting immense energy to keep both of them floating at the same height, Kishiar’s face appeared utterly relaxed. Apparently, his reservoir of power could easily handle it.

The man, wearing a neat smile, tilted his head.

“Shall we leave the testing area and descend? If you’re scared, hold on tight.”

Kishiar began to walk leisurely through the empty air, as if strolling on flat ground. Although there was nothing underfoot, walking alongside him felt as if some unseen force was supporting themas if invisible land and stairs existed.

While Yuder was accustomed to running on the wind, this experience was unfamiliar but not frightening.

The warm sunlight pushed back the chill of winter air. Long, pale fingers covered in gloves aimlessly swayed between moments of comfortable silence. Surely, there had never been more than a few people in this world who had enjoyed such a simple yet extraordinary walk.

The only regret was… due to the gloves Yuder wore, the warmth of their clasped hands couldn’t be felt directly.

“Why do you keep fidgeting? Are you uncomfortable?”

“No.”

Perhaps sensing Yuder’s disappointment, Kishiar paused in his steps and turned his head. Hesitant, Yuder released the gloved hand he had been holding. Before Kishiar’s gaze could change subtly, Yuder quickly pulled off his glove and stuffed it carelessly into his pocket, then spoke.

“I was just debating whether to take off the glove. Now that I have, may I hold your hand again?”

“Ah…”

Kishiar chuckled once more.

“So that’s what it was. Of course, it’s fine with me.”

This time, Yuder took the initiative, sliding his fingers back into Kishiar’s hand.

“Isn’t it cold?”

“It’s fine.”

Even though Yuder’s hand, warmed by the insulating glove, met Kishiar’s colder hand, it felt unexpectedly pleasing.

“Are you not uncomfortable with my rough hands?”

“Why would I be? Haven’t I said they make you even more intriguing and charming?”

Kishiar grinned, teasingly. Yuder, rather than returning the smile, looked down at their clasped hands.

“I also think that’s what makes it even better.”

For a moment, Kishiar was silent but then subtly tightened his grip on Yuder’s hand. In response, Yuder exerted even greater force.

A new warmth circulated between the concave parts of their palmsa small, warm space that no chill could invade.

Amidst this pleasant silence, Yuder took a quick glance at Kishiar’s smiling face.

‘Now would be a good time to say something.’

They were alone, high up where nobody else’s gaze could reach them; no need to worry about the opinions of others. It was perhaps the best time to discuss the subtle changes he noticed in Kishiar.

But… seeing that smile, how could he think that it could contain something unknown, even to Yuder?

Instead, what flowed from Yuder’s mouth was a slightly different question.

“When do you plan to leave the west?”

“As soon as the second test wraps up. I have some things to take care of, but I don’t expect it’ll take more than three days.”

Kishiar answered without hesitation.

“Is there anything else you need to do?”

“You remember that Baron Koelt has been continuously investigating the documents that came from the fourth floor of the dungeon, right?”

“You’re talking about the illustrations and observation notes related to monsters studied by the First Tain Duke?”

“Exactly. After examining all of those, using the ancient language references the Duke had, it turns out he sent all the by-products and corpses of the monsters he studied to some specific regions and places.”

It was a detail not thoroughly documented before.

“According to the Baron’s speculation, it’s somewhere between the west and the south. Since we’re heading south after the west, we might as well stop by. There’s also another place near there we need to visit.”

“Where else?”

“The place where the Crown Prince had someone collect poisonous mushrooms. Fortunately, it’s not too far from the previously mentioned location. It’s quite remote, but at our pace, it shouldn’t take long to get there.”

The poisonous mushroom that Crown Prince Katchian had secretly obtained to kill Lenore Shand Apetoit was a matter that had seemingly come to an end. Yuder had preemptively identified the mushroom with future information and informed Kishiar, aiming to sever the relationship between Apeto and the Crown Prince permanently.

“Did another issue arise from that past event?”

“No, rather the opposite, actually.”

A smooth, icy smile floated across Kishiar’s face.

“I had ordered a re-investigation of that mushroom. You see, it’s not unique to the area where the Crown Prince obtained it, and I found myself curious as to why he would specifically go there to get it.”

“So, did you find anything?”

“You know the saying, ‘A suspicious man only treads on ground he has walked before?’”

Upon hearing the old saying, Yuder instantly understood what Kishiar was trying to discover.

‘He must’ve suspected that the Crown Prince had deeper ties to that land, and that’s why he obtained the mushroom there.’

If Kishiar was willing to go and check the place himself, he must’ve grasped some sort of clue.

As if confirming Yuder’s thoughts, the man continued.

“When the Crown Prince first appeared in the capital, Duke Diarca introduced him as an Eastern-born noble. Specifically, he was said to be the child of the Duke’s cousin’s daughter. A fine young lord of noble lineage who had lost his parents early but grew up well with the support of the Diarca family. Katchian La Orr was as distinguishedor rather, as undistinguishedas any other candidate for Crown Prince.”

By that logic, the Crown Prince should’ve had no ties to a remote western village. But what was the actual situation?

Yuder was well aware of how deeply suspicious Katchian La Orr was. The Crown Prince wanted to know everything he held in his hands, and he was extremely cautious about anything beyond his control.

There was no way he would’ve used an unknown poison from an unfamiliar area to discretely kill someone and frame Kishiar.

The Crown Prince must’ve known that area well in advance.

“That particular area has no known connection to the Diarca family, I presume?”

“Correct. No connection at all. My speculation as to why the Crown Prince obtained the mushroom there may well differ from the

actual reason. Someone else might've helped him, or some unknown factor could've played a role."

"But if your speculation is correct, and we can secure evidence to that effect…it would be monumental."

"Exactly."

Kishiar readily agreed.

"When we re-investigated the village where the mushroom was refined, we found out that some nobles had visited there a few years back to spend the summer. Intriguingly, the Diarca family name suddenly popped up. Isn't that enough reason for us to go and verify things for ourselves?"

Indeed, it was. Sending underlings might lead to some oversight, but the odds of that happening were extremely low if Kishiar and he went themselves.

"When did you manage to conduct such an investigation?"

"I only ordered the re-investigation recently. We were just lucky."

A humble remark attributing everything to luck.

Yet that single word calmed Yuder's excitement, allowing his rationality to settle back in place.

Feeling something strange, he looked again, only to find Kishiar smiling.

"Well, we've reached the house of Baron Koelt. I've been supervising the test and even exerted some effort today, so after dinner, you should take a rest."

"Will you not be resting, Commander?"

“Of course, I’ll rest as well.”

Upon hearing his response, Yuder slightly furrowed his brow, then relaxed it.

“…You truly intend to rest, don’t you?”

“Oh? You think I’d pretend to rest? Sadly, I don’t possess that kind of talent.”

The man chuckled, tilting his head playfully. Yuder took a deep breath and looked into his face.

Even behind the mask of face alteration magic, those eyes were focused solely on him. Lips that seemed like they would answer any question he had honestly stared back at Yuder with serene assurance.

“…In that case, may I come and check on you?”

“Of course. You’re always welcome.”

“What I mean is, would it be alright if I continue to sleep in your room tomorrow, and the days after that?”

At that, for the first time, Kishiar’s expression subtly changed.

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Chapter 604

“Hmm Before I answer, I have a question that I think needs to be addressed first. The ‘time’ is drawing near; is that going to be a problem?”

The ‘time’ referred to was, of course, the heat period. Yuder knew full well the risks involved in committing to spend nights with another individual with a second gender when it was unclear when or how the mating urge would manifest.

‘A few months ago, I wouldnt have dared to bring this up, no matter how concerned I was.’

But now was different. Yuder met the man’s scrutinizing gaze head-on, a gaze that was simultaneously filled with concern for him.

“That’s a bit redundant, don’t you think? If it were a problem, I wouldn’t have come this far in the first place.”

The words might have sounded indifferent, but the implications were anything but trivial. Yuder looked intently at the man who was silently watching him and added decisively,

“Or is there another reason you find it difficult to keep inviting me?”

“Why would that be?”

Eventually, Kishiar let out a chuckle as if admitting defeat, raising his hand. A long sigh escaped from his lips, sweeping across his own face.

“It seems my assistant had good reason for wanting to keep a close eye on me, didnt you?”

“I won’t deny it.”

“Good. Do whatever you wish, then.”

Kishiar openly expressed his consent.

Feeling emboldened, Yuder immediately moved his belongings to Kishiars bedroom that night.

“…So, nothing else has happened since?”

The next day, Nathan Zuckerman quietly inquired. He and Yuder were having another discreet meeting to exchange information related to Kishiars activities.

The knight, upon learning that Yuder had moved into Kishiar’s bedroom, didnt seem particularly surprised and simply asked for a brief update on the situation. A convenient conversational partner for information exchange, indeed.

“Yes. After wrapping up work as usual, he spoke with me and then fell asleep. I stayed awake until dawn to be sure.”

“But youre not going to let your guard down just because of one quiet night, are you?”

“Of course not. I plan to continue keeping an eye on him.”

Hearing Yuders resolute answer, Nathan Zuckerman silently replaced the empty dessert bowl on the table. A new pie appeared in its place, reminiscent of a monster that keeps respawning no matter how many times its defeated.

“How has it been on your end, Sir Zuckerman? Anything unusual?”

“Nothing out of the ordinary on my end, but”

“Was there something else on your mind?”

“When I stepped away from the Duke for a brief moment due to work and returned, I felt a slight change in the flow of surrounding energies. It was similar to the change that often occurs when using magic tools, although I can’t be certain.”

“Magic tools, you say I see.”

After a few more rounds of strictly business-like conversation, Yuder stood up to leave. Nathan Zuckerman cleared away the empty dishes and offered him something. Upon taking a closer look, it was a medicinal tablet made from ground leaves.

“What is this?”

“It’s a recovery agent provided by the Peletta Knights for night watch duties. You didnt sleep much last night, and its likely you wont get much sleep in the future either, so please take it.”

“I’ll be fine”

“It wont hurt to have it. If even a hint of sleep deprivation shows on your face, the Duke will notice right away. Just take it.”

And so, Yuder accepted the tablet, still a bit bewildered but grateful.

Mentioning Kishiar’s name made it difficult to refuse. Yuder accepted with a subtle expression of gratitude and ate it.

Three more days passed.

Kishiar remained unchanged. Yuder vigilantly observed him, even cutting back on sleep, but Kishiar no longer engaged in strategy games; he simply slept peacefully.

Thanks to that, Yuder also experienced peaceful nights without waking up to the sudden cold, as he used to. Although he lacked some sleep, considering there were days in his previous life when he would go without sleep to complete missions, this was a small inconvenience.

‘The recovery potion given by Nathan Zuckerman turned out to be surprisingly effective.’

Today was the last day he would spend in the west anyway. Yuder meticulously observed the Awakeners taking their tests, evaluating their potential, abilities, and information.

Among the western candidates, many had promising qualities. In particular, those who caught Yuder’s eye were Awakeners from the Star of Nagran’s western base, who had been rescued along with Marty. They were originally non-Awakeners, but became awakened after coming to their senses under the care of the Western Branch, gaining remarkably powerful defensive abilities due to their difficult pasts.

‘If they and people like Marty grow well, the western branch will have unparalleled defensive capabilities.’

Branch Leader Emun’s abilities also involved hiding in the shadows, so they would mesh well with such individuals. Their future growth was promising.

In his previous life, each regional branch had Awakeners with particular tendencies. Now that he somewhat understood how these abilities manifested, he could guess how such patterns were established.

However, every positive aspect has a flip side.

Among the western candidates, there were many who had ulterior motives, including spies. Many fled after Yuder exposed one,

but he still caught several afterward.

Most were mercenaries sent by the western nobles.

Emun and the existing members of the western branch were shocked that they couldn't filter these people out in the preliminary round, but they quickly channeled their shock into anger and pride.

It was only natural, given how well the Commander and his assistant kept everyone in line.

'Emun did do something good, at least.'

Busy as he was, Emun did a fantastic job identifying the potential in an Awakener who might have been kicked out without even taking the preliminary exam. When Yuder saw the Awakeners name on the list for the second round, he felt the same way as when he first encountered Kanna Wand at the application center.

That very person now stood before Yuder for the final test.

"Hello… I am Gloe."

Gloe, a commoner girl without a family name. Currently only sixteen, she was the one who had served the longest as both the Deputy Commander of Jung Division and Deputy Commander of Shin Division in the Cavalry that Yuder led in a previous life.

'Originally from a wandering troupe. Spent her childhood reading cards for money.'

Fittingly, her awakened ability also manifested through the worn-out cards she carried.

"My ability is to read these cards to give you blessings you'll need in the future. I can only do it once a day… but the effects are certain."

The long, unkempt black hair that mostly covered the face and the somber voice made the word “blessing” sound almost like a curse. Occasionally, there were those who rubbed their arms with a shiver, seemingly sharing the same sentiment.

“Could it be real? I can’t believe it…”

“A blessing for the future? Such a vague ability, isn’t it? How did she pass the first round?”

“Hey, Emun. Why did you pass her?”

Someone among the members poked Emun’s side, to which Emun shook his head with a firm expression.

“Just watch. Her ability is real.”

‘Yes, it’s real. And quite impressive at that.’

“I will now demonstrate my ability… Is there anyone who would like a reading from me?”

When Gloe scanned the surroundings, everyone deliberately avoided eye contact. Emun, who had passed her in the first round, was the exception as he couldn’t participate.

Yuder, noticing Gloe’s growing discomfort, raised his hand.

“Do it for me.”

“Ah! Yes… Understood…”

It seemed Gloe recognized who Yuder was, as her face turned even paler. The atmosphere around her grew colder, as if the temperature had dropped by about 5 degrees, but Yuder didn’t mind and stepped forward.

Gloe shuffled some old cards on the table and drew five.

“Choose one card from these five.”

Without hesitation, Yuder picked the middle card. The flipped card depicted a jester with a pointy hat, playing a trumpet and dancing. Gloe softly uttered the card’s name.

“Festival of the Trumpeting Jester.”

At that moment, a faint and transparent mist rose from the card and seeped into Yuder. It was a warm and mysterious sensation.

“A blessing has been cast upon you, which will protect you from a single impending danger.”

“Really?”

“I can’t tell from here…”

“A danger to Yuder’s body? Can such a thing even happen? I doubt we can verify this blessing’s effect.”

As the western members murmured and questioned the authenticity of the blessing, Gloe looked lost.

“No, usually the blessings are immediately verifiable or at least within a day… I’m not lying. It’s real.”

“I understand.”

“Yes?”

“It means you’ve passed.”

“Yes?”

“Thank you for applying to the Cavalry so early. If you ever think of coming to the capital, let Emun Philang know anytime. We’ll arrange a place for you.”

“…What?!”

While Gloe was doubting her ears, Yuder asked her one more thing. After hearing her answer, he returned to his judging seat. Kishiar, who had been sitting with his arms crossed, tilted his head and asked,

“Was she that impressive?”

“Though it’s called a blessing, it’s closer to foresight. It’s a great fortune that she came to the Cavalry this early.”

From what Yuder knew, the types of blessings Gloe’s cards could bestow weren’t many, but they varied in intensity. In other words, if one knew in advance which blessing would be bestowed, they could guess the nature and intensity of the impending danger.

Kishiar nodded after hearing the story.

“So, what did the assistant ask her at the end?”

“I asked how strong the blessing from that card was.”

“And her answer?”

“She said it was the strongest blessing her cards could currently bestow.”

Realizing the implications, Kishiar’s eyes changed slightly.

“That means…”

“It seems my journey from the west to the south won’t be as smooth as I’d hoped.”

However, he had the chance to prepare in advance, so in a way, it was a stroke of luck.

That’s what he thought as he responded, but Kishiar seemed to have a slightly different idea.

“We were told we’d see results within a day, right? In that case, we should delay our departure by a day.”

“There’s really no need to do that”

“It’s fine. Isn’t it better to stay here, where we can control the risks, than to be exposed to uncontrollable dangers outside?”

In the end, Kishiar postponed the departure date from the west by one day.

‘Hmm The healing potion that Nathan Zuckerman gave me has also worn off Well, one more day should be fine.’

However, in the early hours of the next day, Yuder suddenly woke up.

Confused as to when he had fallen asleep, Yuder blinked his eyes. Just then, a faint clicking sound echoed in the darkness.

His confusion evaporated instantly, replaced by a bone-chilling cold. Instinctively feeling for the spot next to him, he found it empty.

Yuder realized this was the perfect opportunity to investigate Kishiar’s strange behavior.

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Chapter 605

The lodging where Kishiar stayed was the largest room in an old mansion owned by the frugal and conservative Baron Koelt. The mansion had rooms with multiple purposes, all connected by a confusing array of doors. Anyone unfamiliar with the layout could easily find themselves wandering in circles, eventually ending up outside. It was an invaluable mechanism designed to protect the owner of the house.

Navigating through such a place in complete darkness without even a single lamp lit would be difficult for most. But not for Yuder. He moved as naturally as if he were walking in broad daylight, deftly avoiding obstacles.

Ever since his eye had become an Eye of Magic, Yuder had hardly been inconvenienced by darkness, even when his eye wasnt glowing its gold hue.

Click. A faint sound reached his ears once more. Perhaps because he was getting closer, the nature of the sound was now more clearly discernable.

The momentary noise of hard stones colliding.

There was no mistaking itit was undoubtedly the sound of pieces hitting the board in a strategy game.

Was Kishiar playing a strategy game by himself?

Why at this time? Alone

No. Let’s hold off on the questions until he confirmed the situation firsthand. Yuder focused even more, dampening his presence to an extraordinary extent. Knights were trained to mask their presence

through physical control, but Yuder was capable of achieving the same effect, but more brilliantly, when necessary.

Whoosh

Wind power, summoned by his will, wrapped around Yuder's feet and body without making a sound. A sensation as if the subtle air currents around him had suddenly stilled washed over him, silencing all noise. Now, there were very few in the world who would be aware of Yuders movements, no matter what he did.

It was the first time hed gone to such lengths to mask his presence since his return. And it had to be now, of all times.

But what could he do? If something inexplicable was happening with Kishiar, then Yuder had to find out what it was.

As he continued walking, his heightened senses guided him like invisible limbs groping through the air, leading him in the right direction.

Just as he rounded a fireplace, passed a long bookshelf along the wall, and was about to cross the third doorfinally, a faint outline of someone appeared in the darkness. Yuder deftly halted his steps.

Even if the shimmering golden locks werent visible, there was no room for doubt about who it was. The blood coursing through his veins screamed it.

He had finally found Kishiar.

But Kishiars appearance was both as Yuder had suspected and startlingly different.

The man sat alone before a hexagonal board, his hands moving as if unaffected by the darkness. The rhythmic click, click sounds resonated continuously.

His movements looked as usual, but the state of the board he shaped with those hands in the quietude was slightly different.

White pieces captured black, then black captured white in turn. The fluid movements traced a trajectory that seemed strangely familiar.

Thats… the review of our second game, isnt it?

His heart rate involuntarily quickened at the startling realization.

Kishiar was not simply playing a game by himself; he was recreating the game they had played together, reviewing it move by move.

The order of the pieces they had placed then was revived perfectly by Kishiars alternating hands placing black and white pieces. Even the momentary hesitation that Yuder had felt during that game was flawlessly reenacted. Staring blankly at the spectacle, it wasn’t long before the game neared its end.

The moment the last key-like tile slotted in among the strategically scattered white tiles, a meticulously calculated, beautiful formation revealed itself. It was a formation that resembled wings, as if enveloping everything within its reacha perfect net with no room for the enemy to escape.

The second game would certainly have ended with the completion of this formation, but Kishiar began moving his hand again without even sparing a glance at the finished product.

All the tiles returned to their original places, reverting to their initial state. The movements that followed were no different than before. The only slight difference was that this time he was reviewing the moves from their first game.

It was then that Yuder finally realized.

This was not something Kishiar had done once or twice.

It was more than just a review of the game's moves. What was being recreated at Kishiar's fingertips was not just the game's circumstances but the entire flow of words and emotions that had been exchanged between them that day.

One couldn't replicate this without having memorized every single aspect of that moment.

While the movements were undeniably rhythmic and elegant, the aura they emitted was far removed from calmness or serenity.

A tranquility that refrained from even a hint of warmth.

A silence that echoed like an anxious scream.

Watching the tiles being laid down by those automatically moving fingers, Yuder felt a sudden chill spreading in his chest. That momentary sensation, which made the hairs on his body stand on end, disappeared in the blink of an eye. And yet, that allowed him to understand its nature more clearly.

This is

It wasn't something Yuder had sensed upon waking up; it was a strong emotion that seemed to surge from afar and vanish like an ebbing tide, leaving only its afterimage.

A chill devoid of any warmth, though brief, had considerable impact.

The nerves that had tensed up to their limits were fraying at the edges, and the frozen tension felt like it was pounding at the flesh from the inside. It was an aspect he never thought he'd sense from Kishiar.

Unknowingly, Yuder flinched and bit his lip.

Meanwhile, Kishiar had finished reviewing the second game and was rearranging the tiles. His face, hidden in the darkness, looked as if he was just another person engrossed in the game. However, it no longer appeared that way to Yuder.

Some movements can seem so slow and peaceful that they paradoxically induce a sense of quiet anxiety.

Yes… anxiety.

Unbelievable as it was, the man who looked utterly serene was reviewing the games in a state of utter anxiety. As if endlessly repeating the games that encompassed all the experiences Yuder had ever had in his previous life would reveal something unknown.

The cold emotions that seemed to be skimming the surface were not directed outward but inward, toward Kishiar himself. It was the result of an anxiety that he couldn’t restrain, even though he knew he shouldn’t be feeling it.

Has it been like this ever since that day?

He was relieved because he trusted him, because he accepted what he said.

It had seemed fine; he had appeared to be looking for a new path for the future, which was why he had been truly relieved.

The sincerity in his smiling face, even when he joked about conquering the world, had undoubtedly been genuine.

However, the silent anxiety he was witnessing now was also likely a part of what Kishiar had felt that day.

Even as he mingled with Yuder, a portion of his own relentless, unsparing stubbornnesssomething he had endeavored to hide until the very endwas present here.

The face of the man, forever cycling between that day's defeat and victory, was as flawless and beautiful as a chiseled sculpture, a beauty that only served to claw painfully at one's heart.

'…'

Images of Kishiar that Yuder had seen over time rapidly flickered through his mind.

Kishiar, engrossed in watching a strategy game board, citing it as reminiscent of old times. The soft glint in his eyes when they shared jokes, laughter, and kisses for the sheer joy of the moment. The same game board that never left his office desk, even amidst his busyness.

To Yuder Aile, Kishiar had always acted with consistent honesty, always maintaining an air of composure. However, in matters he deemed unnecessary, he ruthlessly suppressed and concealed his own feelings, feeling no obligation to be forthright.

Presumably, Kishiar must have thought his own anxiety and negative emotions wouldn't be of any help to Yuder, nor to the situation at hand.

It was indeed a rational conclusion.

But was it the perfect conclusion? Certainly not.

An inexplicable heat surged violently within his chest, hotter even than when a hot poker was pressed into a wound. Something ablaze scorched the inside of his throat, eyes, head, and some other unidentifiable places.

He felt stupid for having been overly trusting of Kishiar until now. An unjustified thought that he shouldn’t have done so invaded his being.

The moment Yuder bit his lip even harder, Kishiar’s latest introspection came to an end. For a moment, Kishiar reached out as if to replay his introspection, then hesitated as if recalling something.

The next moment, Kishiar slowly caressed the inner part of the ring on his right hand with his left hand. As far as Yuder knew, the ring was certainly a magic tool for altering one’s appearance. As Kishiar touched not the embedded gem but the inner metal part, a faint light emanated from his palm, emitting a powder of light. A golden magic power gently descended upon Kishiar.

To an ordinary person, it would have seemed to end there, but Yuder saw, through his special vision, how that magic power affected Kishiars body.

The skin, imbued with particles of light, faintly glowed as his complexion returned. His lips, which were a bit paler than usual, and his eyes, which had sunk coldly and dried up, all regained their natural moisture.

It resembled, perhaps even exceeded, the effect of receiving vitality-enhancing divine power from a priest.

‘Nathan Zukerman said that while he was away for a while yesterday, he felt a change in the flow around Kishiar, similar to when he used a magic tool.

He had assumed that Kishiar might have briefly experimented with the facial-altering magic tool, but now that he saw the results, he knew otherwise.

Yuder decided that there was no longer any need for restraint. He withdrew the still wind that had been wrapping around him.

No sooner had he done so than Kishiar turned his head.

Their gazes met in the darkness.

“…So its come to this.”

A soft murmur escaped from between Kishiars lips.

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Chapter 606

Kishiar was a man incredibly adept at reading the room, almost to the point where you might think he could read minds. Meeting Yuder's gaze, Kishiar seemed to immediately sense that Yuder hadn't just arrived. He maintained silence, offering no excuses.

Slowly, Yuder advanced until he stood close to him. He halted at a distance where he could reach out and touch the strategy game board on the table.

Even though he had only been here for less than a week, the game board was covered in faint marks, visible up close. Seeing the marks, particularly concentrated in certain spots, gave him a feeling akin to having a knife twisted in his gut.

Yuder was about to express his emotions openly, but he stopped short upon locking eyes with Kishiar's red irises.

It's good that he's seen everything and learned the truth. But what would be the most appropriate thing to say in this situation?

Why are you doing this?

Why did you hide this from me?

Ive always suspected something. Now that Ive seen everything, can you please be honest?

""

No. None of these questions seemed fitting for a conversation with Kishiar.

'I don't want to interrogate him.'

The questions he’d thought of sounded accusatory, as if he were talking to a criminal caught in the act. This was the first time that his lack of eloquence felt overwhelmingly cumbersome.

Growing frustrated with himself, Yuder sighed heavily. Finally, Kishiar broke the silence.

“You look vexed. You have a lot on your mind, don’t you?”

“Indeed, its painfully clear that I lack the gift of gab.”

“It doesn’t matter. Just say what you want to say. I’ll listen.”

“That’s exactly why I’m hesitating. I dont want to say it carelessly.”

“Even if I wont take it that way?”

“To me, it matters.”

“A difficult issue, isnt it.”

Yuder looked at Kishiar, whose lips faintly curled upward, and impulsively asked, “What would you say first in a situation like this?”

“Are you asking me what I would say to myself?”

“Is that not allowed?”

After his somewhat argumentative response, Yuder briefly regretted it. His bad mood had given rise to a defiant tone, something he hadn’t employed in a long time. Yet Kishiar did not point this out; he just let out an even deeper laugh.

“Of course, theres no rule that says you can’t.”

”’’

“If it were me, well, Id scan the surroundings of the person I’m speaking to and say whatever comes to mind first. It’s a good way to start a conversation.”

Yuder glanced around the area where Kishiar sat.

A moment later, words flowed from his pallid lips in a voice slightly slower and heavier than usual.

“You haven’t lit a single lamp or even put on an overcoat.”

”’’

“It must be cold. Let me light the fire first.”

No hand movement was needed. The moment Yuder blinked, a spark ignited in a small wall furnace and various lamps scattered around the room.

Following that, a thin stream of water gracefully flew through the air, filling two empty teacups. A breeze carried some tea leaves into the cups, and soon, warm steam began to rise from them.

Yuder pushed one of the completed cups of tea toward Kishiar.

“Please drink.”

Kishiar, who had been staring pensively at his cup, eventually picked it up. Yuder, who had been slightly anxious about whether he would drink it, finally took his own seat across from him and sipped his share of the tea.

The warmth of the brewed water seemed to stabilize the boiling turmoil within. His mind became clearer. Kishiar’s way of initiating conversation was indeed effective.

So… the important thing is the solution, not the situation itself.

Yuder decided on what to say after taking a few more sips.

Deeply rooted in Kishiar La Orr’s unusual behavior was a habit of suppressing himself to the extreme. He was incredibly harsh on himself, but his positive disposition and strong will allowed him to laugh off even the toughest challenges. This was the primary reason for his current state. However, the perfect shield of rationality and patience wasn’t all there was to Kishiar.

He was, after all, human. Just because he could endure what most couldn’t didn’t mean he had no limits. The recent events were a good example, but Yuder knew of times when Kishiar had reached his limits even more profoundly.

It was Kishiar La Orr from his past life.

“When I told you about my experiences through the strategy games, there was one thing I didn’t mention.”

Kishiar blinked rapidly, perhaps finding the statement unexpected.

“I should have told you about the previous Commander, even if you thought it wasn’t important.”

Kishiar’s fingers, which had been playing with his cup, stopped.

“Do you think I acted this way because of that? I didn’t. And that story…”

“Yes. You said to speak when everything becomes clear and I want to tell. But it’s not like the other things were so clear that I had to speak of them first, so it doesn’t matter, does it?”

A golden light shimmered in Yuder’s determined dark eyes.

“I want to tell you now. And you promised to listen to anything I had to say.”

So, in front of Yuder’s silent plea, Kishiar couldn’t say anything more. Yuder moistened his dry lips with tea and took a deep breath.

He hadn’t expected to talk about the Kishiar from his past life to the current Kishiar in this manner. But then, when had anything related to Kishiar ever gone as Yuder had planned?

Even after turning back time, the man before him had never acted as Yuder had predicted.

Perhaps that unpredictability was why they had the relationship they did now.

All the uncertainties, fears, deep regrets, and now-forgotten anger were gathered by Yuder to say the only thing he could for the man before him.

Even if Kishiar felt deeply disappointed or harbored negative feelings after hearing this story.

Still… it had to be done.

No, he desperately wanted to.

“You might only know the current me, but I know a different you.”

“…”

“He was a Commander with cracks in his vessel, who had to watch those around him leave first. He stepped down, handing his position to a commoner, only to be assassinated by the very successor he had chosen.”

Yuder stared into the eyes that seemed frozen in time, filled with old pain.

He must have had some idea from the clues and conversations they'd had so far. He wasn't overly surprised, but he was still shocked. The spreading emotions proved it.

"Yes, that successor was me."

"Yuder."

Kishiar called out his name in a low moan. Yuder didn't respond.

"After returning here, I realized that my memories from that time are not as clear as I thought they might be. There may be details I'm unaware of, but what is certain is that I undertook the task and completed it quite successfully. I can't deny that. For now, I'd like to start by talking about the kind of person the Commander was at that time."

"…"

Yuder began his tale, idly fiddling with a piece before him.

It all started when a twenty-year-old kid from the countryside managed to join the Cavalry and received his first greeting from the Commander.

"Initially, I don't think the situation was much different from now. It seemed that the issue with the Commander's leadership arose after the mission to retrieve the Red Stone."

However, after that, Kishiar was no longer able to manage the unit in the same meticulous way. Their first personal encounter during a swordsmanship training session, something they had once dreamt about, also occurred around that time.

"The Commander noticed me during his night rounds. I was absorbed in my swordsmanship training, isolated from the rest of the unit. That was the beginning."

Capturing my mistakes masterfully, a sense of competitiveness grew within me, leading me to train rigorously. Apparently, the effort was not in vain; my name was called during the Deputy Commander announcements some time later. It felt burdensome, but on some level, I was proud to have my skills recognized.

However, that pride didn't last long. An incident occurred simultaneously with the manifestation of my second gender.

Yuder pondered for quite some time on how to articulate the event, but his eventual words were concise.

"While discussing matters with the Commander as the Deputy, my second gender suddenly manifested. Given that it happened in a much more unexpected situation than now, the outcome was far from favorable."

Kishiar's eyes flickered ever so slightly.

"When I came to my senses, about a week had passed, and I started feeling emotions of others that I had never felt before. The Commander said he would find the reason for what happened to me… but I don't think I ever got that answer."

The reason for the uncertain tone was because he could no longer fully trust his memories from that time.

"Well, many other events transpired afterward. A horde of colossal monsters appeared in the west, causing most of the region to collapse. Many Cavalry members died or were injured and left the unit. Around the time these matters were concluding, I was nominated as the successor to the Cavalry Commander and learned what was necessary for the position."

"…"

The death of Emperor Keilusa also occurred around that time. Crown Prince Katchian ascended the throne, and you stepped down from your Commander position.

“Even after retreating to Peletta, it wasn’t peaceful. Despite rumors swirling that you harbored rebellious intentions, you said nothing. Whether that was true or not, I still don’t know. However, the assassination order issued against you was undoubtedly related to those rumors.”

Yuder’s narrative captured the events and emotions, laying bare the complexities of a time fraught with uncertainty and change.

Over the course of the year since Kishiar had stepped away, Emperor Katchian quietly observed Peletta. However, as rumors grew too intense to ignore, he had resorted to sending imperial knights as an indirect warning and pressure. Finally, he summoned Yuder and gave him his first secret mission.

Yuder still remembered the weight of the sword he had received from Emperor Katchian in the hidden passageway of the imperial garden that day.

“Theres no need for a separate report confirming the success of your mission. Prove to me why the Cavalry should continue to exist, Commander.”

Kishiar’s life and the future of the Cavalry.

Between the two, Yuder chose the latter and carried out the assassination of Duke Peletta with that sword.

A relationship, brief as it was, spanning only about two years, was thus severed.

“If you’ve listened up to here, you’d understand that I was not particularly close to the Commander at that time. Quite the opposite,

in fact.”

An entity forever incomprehensible. A figure who had only brought suffering after an inexplicable connection. A person who revealed nothing.

Yet, at the same time, he was the mentor who had taught Yuder everything, the senior who had left behind the Cavalry, and the only one with whom he had ever shared a relationship.

Yuder fell silent for a long while after finishing his story.

He had tried to recount the tale as objectively as possible, but whether he succeeded, he could not be certain.

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Chapter 607

I felt more drained just from talking than I did after training for three days straight, he thought. By the time he finished speaking, the darkness outside the window had given way to a faint light. The tea in his mouth had grown cold. Yuder murmured, weighed down by fatigue.

“Do you know why I felt the need to share this story now?”

If anyone understood what he wanted to convey, it was probably Kishiar, perhaps even better than Yuder himself.

“Is it to warn me not to become the same person as before?”

His response didn’t disappoint, but it was more aggressive than Yuder had anticipated. Yuder felt the need to soften his words.

“You might know this, but even after starting the new game, I couldn’t trust the Commander for a long time. Who do you think made me speak up?”

Facing the man who probably knew the answer, Yuder declared, “It was you.”

It was the unwavering trust and faith he had shown first. Emotions they had never shared before. Because Kishiar had shown his honesty and desire first, Yuder felt he could reciprocate.

The biggest difference between his past life and now lay there.

Hiding his tumultuous feelings, Yuder continued, “I am, admittedly, quite ambitious. I have never lost to anyone out of sheer willpower.”

Yuder’s ambitions weren’t directed toward money, jewels, precious swords, or greater power. They were always about his own strength, discovering more effective training methods, and ways to win in battles.

But just because his desires differed from others didn’t mean they were any less intense. Yuder never gave up on what he wanted.

And now, it was time to pour that determination onto the only person who had ever truly ignited Yuder’s ambition.

“This story was the secret I intended to keep until the very end, my final barrier. As you once said, since you’ve broken down all my walls, shouldn’t I do the same?”

“…”

“I’ve laid myself bare, so now, Commander, show me your ‘real’ self.”

Yuder had seen enough of Kishiar’s flaws. He had witnessed the pain the man hid, his ruthless and secretive side, and even the moments when he reached the limits of his patience.

That’s why Yuder wanted all of Kishiar. He believed he had every right to know the very core of the man.

‘Of course, it won’t be easy.’

He didn’t expect to get everything he wanted right away. But that was okay.

“I’m not asking for everything right now. Just as you did, I’ll wait until I break down all the barriers to get what I want.”

Yuder curled his lips into a smile. It was an awkward and peculiar expression, but Kishiar couldn’t take his eyes off him.

“I wish you had just scolded me. This feels even worse.”

A bitter smile appeared on the man’s face.

“If you had asked for the most beautiful and perfect parts of me, I would have given them to you. But you want the opposite. What am I to do?”

“That’s why I said I’d wait. I’m not very confident in this area, but once I learn something, I never forget. I’ll do my best.”

Kishiar covered his eyes with his hand, letting out a long sigh. The youthful vigor that once adorned his face through the use of magic had now been replaced by a fleeting expression of deep fatigue and anxiety.

Yuder realized that he had finally achieved what he had longed for.

“…That’s all I wanted to say. If you wish to punish me now, I will accept it graciously.”

“You asked for everything from me just a moment ago, and now you’re asking for punishment.”

“Well, that was then and this is now.”

Yuder had pondered the reaction he would receive after confessing to the killing of Kishiar in a past life.

What would the man say upon learning the truth?

Back when Yuder knew little about him, he had assumed he would be banished and met with negative reactions. As a result, Yuder had thought it best to keep this secret for the sake of what lay ahead. However, after getting to know him and developing feelings

for him, even the thought of revealing the truth made Yuder's blood run cold and his chest tighten with anxiety.

But what about now?

Having revealed everything, Yuder felt an eerie sense of emptiness and calm within. The only thing that filled that void was not a whirlwind of agony, but his own resolve towards Kishiar.

"…If someone has to take responsibility, it should be the person who died in the previous life, stepping forward himself."

As he looked into Yuder's determined eyes, Kishiar finally murmured,

"But from my perspective, even if he had been here, he probably wouldn't have sought to punish you. Especially speaking from my current position, where nothing has yet happened."

"That is"

"Do you think Im speaking too lightly without fully understanding? That's not the case."

Kishiar calmly replied, as if reading Yuder's inner thoughts.

"Think about it. If, as you said, the vessel was already cracked at the time of the Red Stone retrieval mission, then Kishiar from back then was in a condition where his death at any moment wouldn't have been surprising. Honestly, it's more shocking that he even survived for two more years. Being assassinated, at least, would have left a body behind, so in a way, that could be seen as a better fate. Even if I didn't know, I would probably have felt the same."

His words seemed cold for talking about his own past life, but there was no wavering in Kishiar's gaze.

“So, don’t ever speak of it again. Just make sure the same thing doesn’t happen twice.”

His words implied that he wouldn’t hold Yuder responsible for his death in the past life.

Yuder felt a weight lift from his tense shoulders and back.

“…Aren’t you upset, though?”

The Kishiar from his past life had faced a harsh failure. A failure that was nothing short of disastrous when compared to Yuder’s own. It was hard to believe that he would be unfazed by losing everything and dying.

“Yes, I am upset. But not because of something that happened in a life I don’t even remember.”

Just as Yuder was about to ask ‘why then,’ Kishiar spoke first.

“Wasn’t it hard for you?”

“…?”

“Joining the Cavalry right after starting anew, and eventually ending up by my side. It must not have been easy.”

The question seemed trivial, yet for some reason, Yuder found it difficult to respond immediately. Perhaps it was because of Kishiar’s gaze.

“I never thought it was hard.”

Kishiar mused with a hint of self-reflection, “If I were in that position, I probably wouldn’t have given someone like me a second chance. Not even a fraction of kindness, let alone a laugh. I would have kicked him out every time he tried any tricks.”

Although he didn’t physically kick anyone, Yuder felt a pang of conscience for having done similar things.

“What’s wrong with the Commander?”

Kishiar confessed, albeit with a touch of self-derision, “He might look handsome, but he’s actually quite sly. Even as I say this, I find myself relieved to have been given another chance, holding onto the hand I’ve grabbed, coveting it to the point where my head feels like it’s on fire.”

His voice was both soft and cool as he honestly shared his feelings.

“If I say I want to hold you even in such a situation, it would still be strange, wouldn’t it?”

“There’s nothing strange about it,” came the assured response.

“You say that because you don’t know the expression on your own face.”

Yuder raised his hand to touch his face.

“…Is there something wrong with my face?”

Kishiar’s eyebrows seemed to relax, and he reached out to touch Yuder’s face with a smile.

“No, there’s nothing wrong.”

“…”

“May I come over now?”

Yuder nodded, and Kishiar moved closer, embracing him tightly. As they leaned their heads on each other’s shoulders and breathed,

tension melted away bit by bit, their body heat mingling and warming them both.

Finally, it felt like he had properly reconnected with Kishiar.

A soft voice resonated over Yuder's head, his eyes closed.

"It felt like a cold wind was blowing through my heart."

Though his tone was gentle, like a lullaby, the words themselves were not.

"I hated the thought of sleeping because it felt like everything would fade away, like you would disappear in that cold wind. A dulled blade is of no use, after all."

"…"

"It's funny, isn't it? I used to think being able to dull my senses was a strength, but now I don't want to be numb."

Kishiar's labored breath flowed over the shoulder he was leaning on.

"This is precisely why I kept going over it secretly, why I couldn't sleep, why I used magic tools to hide my facial expressions."

It was almost laughable.

His chest felt heavy. Yuder tightened his arms around Kishiar and lowered his head.

"I also hesitated a long time before bringing up today's conversation. Even though I admit my guilt, I was afraid to step out of the current situation. I was cowardly."

He looked so pathetic and foolish that he almost wanted to mock himself.

“If it’s laughable, then my current state is even more so.”

“But that means you’ve grown fond of me, hasn’t it? That’s a good thing.”

“Should I return those words to you?”

“You got me there.”

Daylight had fully arrived outside. Distant noises of early risers could be heard. Normally, it would be time to wake up and get moving, but Yuder signaled with his eyes, tapping on the arm that was holding him.

“Although you may have further thoughts after what I’ve told you today, let’s continue next time. For now, go to sleep.”

“I’m not sleepy. Just a little longer like this…”

“Go to sleep.”

He didn’t say it a third time. Yuder stood up first and helped Kishiar to his feet. With a short laugh that made his nose wrinkle, the man followed Yuder’s lead into the bedroom.

Yuder laid him down and even pulled the blanket over him, then sat beside him. This reminded him of a similar moment before they had left the Great Sarain Forest.

“Am I the only one sleeping?”

“I’ve slept far more than you, Commander. Naturally, I should go out and train, and to prepare to leave.”

“So, this is the real punishment.”

Even though he said that, Kishiar closed his eyes obediently. He was holding Yuder’s hand.

His breathing gradually became even, but Yuder did not let go of his hand and continued to watch him. Though he said he would leave soon, he couldn't let his guard down, as Kishiar was particularly good at deception.

As he looked down, the conversation they had shared began to slowly circle in his mind. The words that lingered the longest were, of course, the ones he'd heard near the end.

"Was it not difficult for you?"

Those were the only words spoken even after hearing of his own demise.

A sensation, somewhat different from before, began to constrict deep within his chest. Yuder swallowed that feeling and turned his head, catching a glimpse of his own face reflected in the glass window.

The man with black hair wore an expression of profound exhaustion, one he did not recognize.

For some reason, Yuder felt like he understood why Kishiar had spoken about his face.

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Chapter 608

“Sage! Sage!”

At the Bright Palace, where the Crown Prince resides.

A young man, sprinting through the tranquil courtyard calling for the sage, was suddenly grabbed by the nape of his neck by another individual.

“What’s going on, Langbarton? Have you forgotten where you are?”

“Let go, Nezo. I must see him immediately!”

“The sage is currently in a meeting with the Crown Prince. He won’t be available for at least another half day. No point in rushing.”

“What? Damn it…”

Hearing this, the young man, Langbarton, finally stopped in his tracks, his expression twisted in frustration. Nezo sighed and softly spoke.

“What’s so urgent that you’re in such a rush? Tell me first.”

“Well…”

Langbarton hesitated momentarily, but then seemed to make up his mind.

“You heard about the signs of intrusion at our quarters, right?”

“Yes, what about it? Did you manage to catch the culprits?”

A few days ago, they had received a belated report of an unauthorized intrusion at the place they had been staying. Due to the tenants moving into the Crown Prince's palace and losing contact, the news had reached them quite late through someone from Diarcas side, who was officially listed as the owner.

The bold criminals, who had intruded in broad daylight, remained at large, and they suspected that Nahan was responsible.

How fortunate it was that the sage's current stay at the Crown Prince's palace was a well-kept secret from the other members of the Star of Nagran. Those who followed the sage were covertly working to locate the Nahan miscreants first.

"That's not it… what's important is something else."

"What could be more important than that?"

"I've retrieved a letter delivered there from our southern base. It arrived yesterday, and the contents are concerning. It seems like Nahan might have stolen a letter they had previously sent from there!"

"What? What are you talking about?"

Nezo widened his eyes.

"Look at this. It was written by Sera."

Langbarton pulled out a letter from his pocket and handed it to Nezo, who quickly adjusted his glasses and began to read.

Nezo's face twisted with a blend of anger and disbelief as he skimmed through the contents.

"What in the world…"

The letter was filled with anxieties, questioning why their previous communication had been left unanswered for so long.

The atmosphere in the southern base had become increasingly tense due to the Awakeners who followed Nahan. The letter detailed the daily conflicts and how many had either wished to leave or had already left the base.

It wasn't just the southern base; the central base, although the western one was gone, was also experiencing a high rate of defections. They were even requesting assistance from the south.

'So many defectors all of a sudden. Has Nahan finally revealed his dark intentions and begun instigating this?'

That was unlikely. People who had grown tired of hiding had simply been drawn in by the recruitment of the Cavalry, but to the overly cautious eyes of Nezo and Langbarton, everything seemed to be because of that.

However, the most baffling part of the letter read, 'Given the circumstances, if the delay continues, we might have to accept the offer made by Southern merchants to protect our southern base.' Nezo was at a loss for words.

"Southern merchants? Who the hell are these people?"

"I'm not sure either. After seeing the mention of a previous letter, I only then realized that there must have been a message we never received," said Langbarton, a hint of concern tingeing his voice.

"So the intruders rummaging through our quarters didn't just take petty items; they also intercepted our correspondence," Nezo mused, looking up from the letter he had been inspecting.

"Exactly. That's why we need to reply immediately. We'll have to change the route for our letters and secure our base as well."

Langbarton was visibly anxious. Nezo, who had been coldly scrutinizing the letter, finally spoke. “Then let’s draft a letter and send it ourselves.”

“Um? But…”

“You know as well as I do how busy the sage is right now. Didn’t you hear that the monstrous assistant of the Cavalry Commander went west just yesterday?”

“Yes, I heard he ferreted out all the initial contacts that Baron Renbow had inserted in the west like a ghost,” Langbarton replied, his face tinged with a shiver.

“Given that the sage couldn’t even get a proper night’s sleep last night while trying to reach out to them, and today he’s worn out from attending to the emotional needs of the overburdened Crown Prince, he won’t have time for such trivial matters.”

“That’s… true.”

“We can tell him tonight after we’ve sent it. He’ll understand the importance.”

Grinding his teeth, Nezo continued, “The silver lining is that the sage has decided to send the people he’ll plant in the Cavalry to the south. Through them, our communication will be faster. We can help Duke Diarca and take care of our affairs simultaneously.”

“Ah, Nezo, you’re always so smart!” Langbarton’s face brightened considerably.

However, just then, Nezo covered Langbarton’s mouth and looked around. “Wait. Did you hear that noise just now?”

“No, what noise? I didn’t hear anything.”

Still uneasy, Nezo cautiously scanned the surroundings before returning. “We shouldn’t talk about such dangerous matters outside. Let’s discuss it inside next time.”

“People around here already shun us. They don’t pay attention to what we’re saying.”

“Even so, we need to be cautious.”

After the two had vanished, muffling their footsteps, a figure emerged from the shadowy corner that Nezo hadn’t fully checked.

“So, those conmen are up to something, huh?” The figure, none other than Kiolle Da Diarca, grimaced as though he had just touched something filthy.

‘Those bastards, besides those six, they have more lackeys elsewhere? And they’re helping my father do what? Planting people in the Cavalry? Father entrusts those plans to those guys? What on earth is he thinking?

Full of questions and indignation, Kiolle remembered something Yuder Aile had told him not long ago. The leader of the healers could potentially be a mental manipulator, so never let your guard down. And watch Duke Diarca carefully for any change in behavior.

Kiolle had thought those words ridiculous then, but after hearing these healer fellows talking about assisting both his father and the Crown Prince, an ominous feeling settled in.

“I’m worried about my father… though the Cavalry is not my concern.”

However, the moment that thought crossed his mind, the small oath mark he had left on his hand activated, making his eyelids unbearably heavy.

“Ugh…!”

Staggering, Kiolle barely caught himself against the solid wall. His heart pounded, and cold sweat trickled down his face as he realized he’d almost died.

Damn, this cursed oath again!

Lately, Kiolle had nearly mastered the limitations of his oath, avoiding sudden bouts of extreme drowsiness. However, there was one exceptionthe third clause: “Assist Yuder Aile to the best of your abilities.”

Damn it all! What’s the standard for helping that black-haired Cavalryman that tortures me like this! Why does the power of the third clause keep getting stronger every day?

His line of thought was both correct and incorrect. The oath’s conditions depended on how helpful Kiolle himself believed he was to Yuder.

Unaware that the more he focused on Yuder and the Cavalry, even dwelling on trivial information, the stronger the power of the third condition became, Kiolle kicked the wall in frustration again today.

Yeah, I get it, okay? You demon!

At that moment, the “demon” in question was calmly exchanging final farewells with his colleagues in the west, completely oblivious to being cursed.

“What? Yuder’s leaving already?”

“That’s too soon. The second round of tests isn’t even finished yet. Stay a little longer. You look tired. Isn’t the Commander still resting?”

Despite the comments about looking tired, Yuder didn’t bat an eye.

“I was supposed to leave yesterday, but I ended up staying an extra day. I’ve seen everyone I needed to see; the rest can choose for themselves.”

“Ahh”

Though his comrades like Emun showed signs of regret, they didn’t try to keep him back. They understood how busy the Commander and his assistant must be.

“Make sure you follow the new training schedule I gave you. I’ll check on your progress the next time we meet.”

“Yes, who would dare not to follow it? You personally designed every bit of it for the Cavalry.”

As soon as the conversation shifted to training, his comrades looked somewhat pained, but ultimately replied in a playful manner. Their faces looked better than when they were in the capital.

“But Yuder, can I ask one last thing? You received a blessing from the Awakener card reader during yesterday’s test observation, right? What happened with that? Was it activated?”

“Ah! I was so curious I couldn’t sleep!”

“Me too!”

Amid the twinkling eyes, Yuder quietly opened his mouth.

“I don’t know yet.”

“What?”

“I said, I don’t know.”

“How can you not know? It must have activated already, right?”

“You can’t really be sure. In the first round, I had a similar blessing. I saw a stone that another participant accidentally dropped bounce off above my head.”

Emun interjected.

“Then what? Could it activate after a day?”

“Just because the blessings received so far have mostly shown effects within a day doesn’t mean this one will too. The name of the blessing is just thatit saves you from danger once.”

In his previous life, blessings from Gloe, who had far superior abilities, activated regardless of time. Though her current abilities were still not mature enough to guarantee activation within a day, it might not be the case always.

Everyone showed disappointed faces at Yuder’s answer.

“Darn it… I was really curious.”

“Let us know when it activates!”

“But what about Marty and Robel?”

Yuder shifted the topic by asking a question.

“Ah, you haven’t greeted them yet? Marty should be at the prison reconstruction site today. Where Marty is, you’ll find Robel. Would you like us to go there together?”

“I’m good.”

With a concise reply, Yuder headed straight for the site where Tainu’s underground prison used to be. Located right near the

Western Branch building, the place still bore strong traces of the destruction wrought by Nahan and his comrades.

Although rebuilding was necessary, the site, which had held criminals, posed challenges for unrestricted access. However, since those who had destroyed the place took it upon themselves to rebuild it, all issues had been resolved.

‘I heard as much but why is there no one here now?’

Lunchtime had already passed, and Yuder entered the vacant construction site and scanned the surroundings. Invoking a minor wind spell to assist his search, he soon heard amplified murmurs coming from somewhere.

What should we do?… In this situation

is it

Yuder moved in the direction of the voices. Soon, he found a group of people gathered in a corner of the construction site.

Marty and Robel were there too.

“What’s going on?”

“Ahh, Sir Yuder, you’re here. Well Two of the people working here suddenly had some issues related to second gender manifestation.”

Upon spotting Yuder, Robel scratched his head with a troubled expression and spoke.

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Chapter 609

“What’s going on?”

“Ahh, Sir Yuder, you’re here. Well Two of the people working here suddenly had some issues related to second gender manifestation.”

Upon spotting Yuder, Robel scratched his head with a troubled expression and spoke.

“Not long ago, Onel started showing symptoms of fever, which appears to have been a sign of a second gender manifestation. Today, he finally manifested, and collapsed. Just so happened that Marsun, who is the only one here to have already undergone a second gender manifestation, was near him at the time. We don’t know if Marsun was influenced by it, but he suddenly lost control, and we had to halt the construction to restrain him.”

“Was there an accident?”

Robel shook his head as Yuder quickly inquired.

“No, no equipment was damaged, and no one was hurt. Both of them are currently unconscious. We’ve isolated them and are trying to figure out what to do next. If Marsun is just temporarily out of control, that’s one thing, but if he’s gone berserk, we may need the help of the Cavalry.”

‘At least that’s something,’ Yuder silently exhaled.

He glanced at the murmuring prisoners nearby. Each one wore a bracelet marking them as criminals; they had all been captured by the Cavalry.

These were the people who had once obstructed the Cavalry, killing ordinary non-Awakeners and destroying buildings. Yet now, the fire had left their eyes. In the presence of Marty, who had awakened because of their actions, none dared to even raise their heads. It was as if they were looking at someone else entirely.

‘So, Robel and Marty were supervising them, as I had heard.’

Yuder had originally planned to just greet Robel and Marty and move on, but with the current unexpected situation, investigating and resolving the issue was now a priority. He took a careful look at their faces before stepping forward.

“Let me ask one thing first. Was Marsun an Alpha or an Omega?”

“Uh, let me think… I don’t quite remember.”

“…”

“Was it Alpha? No, was it Omega? What was it?”

As Robel, who hasnt manifested a second gender himself, furrowed his brow in an attempt to remember, the prisoners behind him made similar expressions.

It was a sharp-eyed woman at the back, who had been silent until now, that spoke up.

“I know. He was an Alpha.”

“Ershi!”

“You should know what the Cavalry will do to you if you speak informally like that! You, who already…”

The other Awakeners around her whispered urgently, but Ershi simply glared darkly at Yuder and offered no other response. The

prisoners were afraid Yuder might say something to her, but he remained silent.

All that came to his mind were some brief memories and information about Ershi.

Ershi, an Awakener who had once run amok, killing people recklessly while fueled by immense hatred toward certain nobles, including Baron Willhem. She had been captured, rather than killed, thanks to Evers intervention, but she had lost most of her powers in the aftermath of her rampage.

Even in her devastated state, she had yelled and cursed at Kishiar when he came to find her. Now, the Ershi in front of him was incomparably calmer and more composed than before.

‘It seems like she’s in her right mind… and the effects of her rampage have mostly worn off.’

Yuder scrutinized her condition before speaking.

“Are you certain?”

“Yes.”

“In that case, it means Onel is in the middle of an Omega manifestation.”

“…”

“Robel, where is Marsun now?”

As Yuder turned his head to ask, Robel blinked and cautiously countered.

“Ah… shouldnt we check on Onel first?”

“Administering sedatives and isolating the individual for about a week should resolve the issue quickly. However, the Awakener with second gender who was standing right next to the Omega could pose more of a risk than the Omega itself.”

Being close to an Awakener with a second gender who had just undergone their initial manifestation was an extremely dangerous situation for an Awakener with an opposing second gender. The strong scent that emanated from them could induce a heat period that wasn’t initially in the cards, and there was no telling what they might do once they lost their reason.

He knew very well how potent that reaction could be, from his experience in his previous life.

In this life, Kishiar had managed to control himself, but not everyone could do that. Therefore, immediate confirmation was essential.

“Understood. Follow me.”

Yuder promptly followed Robel and Marty. Soon, the other prisoners started trailing behind them as well. Nobody hesitated, even though staying outside might offer a brief moment of freedom or perhaps an opportunity to escape.

“We’ve arrived. This way and you’ll soon… Sir Yuder?”

Robel, who had been kindly guiding the group into the prison, suddenly halted and turned to look at Yuder.

“What’s wrong?”

Instead of responding, Yuder lightly massaged his forehead with a somewhat furrowed face.

“As I suspected. I won’t proceed further.”

“What?”

“It means Marsun’s agitation isn’t a precursor to going berserk. However, it seems that his heat period is coming soon. It’s going to be potent, so do not let any Omega Awakeners enter the same building.”

“How could you know that without even seeing… Ah!”

Marty gave Robel a strong jab in the ribs as he mumbled.

“Yuder is an Awakener with a second gender too.”

“Ah, yes, of course. I’d forgotten that you’re an Awakener with a second gender, Yuder.”

The rumor that Yuder and Kishiar had deliberately spread originated in this western region. Yuder was currently the most famous Omega Awakener in the entire empire.

But, despite knowing that, Robel forgot it all as he looked at Yuder’s pale, icy face. He clenched his aching side and secretly swallowed his tears.

“Is it normal for Marsun to suddenly enter heat? I’ve never seen this happen between Awakeners with a second gender before.”

“It may not happen to everyone, but it’s a definite possibility.”

But that didn’t make it any less dangerous.

Nothing was as perilous as a heat period suddenly being triggered. Yuder felt the invisible scent of another person pricking at his skin and nostrils and stepped back a bit. Even the slightest touch had caused a tingling sensation. It was because the scent of the Alpha Awakener was making the Omega Awakener within him wildly react, trying to reel him in like a claw.

‘It’s been a long time since I’ve felt someone else’s scent so strongly.’

Compared to the scent of Kishiar that had once filled the space around him, it was weaker, but the sensation was enough for Yuder to surmise that Marsun was not in a good state.

And when everyone else went downstairs to check, that guess was confirmed.

“Marsun’s body is like a furnace! He can’t breathe properly, and he’s not responding to his name!”

“What do we do? When other guys went through heat, they weren’t this agitated. Why…?”

‘As I thought, the Alphas are more critical than the Omegas. We need to calm him down quickly.’

Yuder turned toward the bewildered crowd.

“Why are you all standing still? We have no time to waste. Immediately separate the Omega Awakeners to another building. Also, both of them need to be given sedatives and sleep aids, so get those as well.”

“But… another building? We’re prisoners, where are you sending us?”

One of the awakened prisoners, who had been wearing a forlorn expression, cautiously asked. Others around him nodded in agreement.

“So where are these medications supposed to come from?”

The man who was trailing off silenced himself as soon as he heard Yuder’s heavy sigh. Yuder turned to all of them and made his

point clear once more.

“The Cavalry building next door wasn’t constructed just for fun. You’ve been treated and have worked there so far, haven’t you? What did you think that was for?”

“Uh? Well, yes, but…”

“Robel.”

Ignoring the unsettled prisoners, Yuder called out to Robel.

“Yes!”

“Take the Omega Awakeners to the Cavalry building. You can get there quickly using your abilities, can’t you?”

“Yes, I understand!”

“Ah, also, please bring my belongings that are there.”

“Your belongings, Yuder? Alright.”

Robel, capable of flying lightweight with the power of wind, nodded. Without another word, he turned and sprinted towards where Onel, identified as an Omega, was located. As he left, Ershi, who had been silent, finally spoke.

“Peter. Jim. You both follow.”

“Huh?”

“You think Robel will move Onel by himself? Idiots, don’t you have hands and feet? Use your abilities! Get the medications!”

“Uh… got it!”

Startled and surprised, the two men hastened to where Robel had gone. Yuder and Ershi's eyes met for a fleeting moment, but neither said anything.

"Follow me, the rest of you. We have to keep an eye on Marsun's condition until the medications arrive."

Ershi turned and made her way to where Marsun was, with the remaining prisoners reluctantly following her. Yuder and Marty were left alone on the upper floor.

"If it's an Alpha's heat period… Are you alright, Yuder? You're an Omega Awakener."

"It's alright to be this close."

He couldn't entirely leave the area, unsure of how Marsun's condition could change. It was best to remain at a distance where the influence would be minimal.

In the tense silence, Yuder looked at the control device around Marty's neck. It was the first time he had seen it properly fastened.

"You're making good use of the control device, I see."

"Yes. When I wear it, I can hardly muster any power. I've been meaning to thank you."

Marty touched the collar around her neck, adding that she liked its inconspicuous, ordinary accessory-like appearance. She cautiously opened her mouth to speak again.

"You really seem to be an extraordinary person, Yuder."

Sensing the implication behind her words, he averted his eyes, to which Marty simply smiled.

“You always make everyone realize what is most important right now.”

“I haven’t done anything so grand.”

It was the truth. He’d merely told people to do what they should be doing. What was so extraordinary about that? But Marty just continued to smile.

“At first, people here were reluctant to work. They yelled, ‘Why should we help with this construction?’ and would rebel or slack off. But eventually… they started to calm down.”

…

“We’re not far from the heart of Tainu. In the course of our work, we inevitably encounter the families, friends, and neighbors of many who have been injured or killed there. And did you know? Since the last incident, there has been a significant surge in Awakeners in Tainu. Quite a few have emerged even from among the bereaved and those who suffered severe injuries.”

A considerable number of those who had faced life-threatening situations in Tainu had newly Awakened. It was a circumstance similar to that of Marty.

Nahan’s associates stepped outside to repair what they had destroyed and continued to observe these individuals. Since there was a Cavalry Branch right next to the prison where they were staying, they couldn’t avoid hearing such news regularly.

It was unclear what they thought as they observed these individuals.

What mattered was that those once enthralled by evil had increasingly found themselves lost in thought and becoming quieter.

“Truthfully, I never thought they would change as I observed them. But lately, I’ve begun to understand the thinking of the Cavalry Commander who put them to work.”

The one who had assigned this task to the prisoners was Kishiar. He had told Ershi that after she had paid her debt to society for a year, he would return to see if she still held the same views.

At that time, Ershi had acted as though she would never change, just like Marty had said…

“…”

Yuder lowered his head and smiled briefly.

“Uh Sir Yuder, did you just”

“I’ve brought it!”

Just then, Robel and the others rushed in, cutting short the conversation between Yuder and Marty.

“Weve got sedatives and tranquilizers, all kinds! Onel is being taken care of over there, and more Cavalry members will be arriving soon!”

“Take them downstairs immediately.”

“Ah, I’ve also brought your luggage, Sir Yuder. Here it is.”

Robel handed Yuder a bag and quickly descended. The floor below became noisy.

‘If only that Marsun guy would fall asleep quietly… I wonder.’

Yuder waited with a piercing gaze.

It wasn’t long before Robel returned, his face sweaty and strained. The outcome was obvious.

“The medicine didn’t work?”

“Yes, we gave him all the medicine we brought, but there’s been no effect”

Marty’s expression darkened as well. However, Yuder calmly opened the bag he had been carrying. As he took something out, Robel looked puzzled.

“What is that?”

“It’s a stabilizer specifically designed for Awakeners with a second gender, produced for testing by the Cavalry headquarters. It should be more effective for those experiencing manifestation and heat period than what he took before.”

“Such a precious thing”

Robel gulped, eyeing the small container filled with only a few pills.

“Did you bring that for yourself, Yuder?”

“It doesn’t matter. The urgent matters should be dealt with first. Take it. If one doesn’t work, give him all.”

“But”

Yuder’s eyes narrowed slightly, signaling he wouldn’t repeat himself. Robel swallowed and accepted the container.

As time passed and Robel descended again, Yuder stood still, focusing on a faint scent in the air. Meanwhile, a few more members of the Western Cavalry Branch arrived. Surprisingly, among them was a familiar face.

“Commander.”

“You promised to stay by my side until I woke up, and yet you lied.”

The man with his face concealed by a robe approached with a smile.

“That’s because”

“I heard the reason. Something urgent came up.”

Kishiar had cast a fleeting glance down the stairs and quickly pulled Yuder by the shoulder.

“The air isn’t good here.”

As he murmured, his scent flowed strongly, pushing away the other odors that filled the space. The awkward scent that seemed to be scratching at the air disappeared, and a familiar scent enveloped him. Without realizing it, a deep breath escaped him.

“We were almost done. You didn’t need to come all this way…”

“How could I not? Especially at a time like this, for such a matter.”

Marty, who was beside them, widened her eyes as if recognizing Kishiar. However, she said nothing and discreetly stepped aside, pretending not to notice.

Time continued to pass in the tense atmosphere. Suddenly, the scent that had been rampant from the floor below began to weaken. The once restless scent gradually faded until it was barely perceptible on the upper floor.

It was then that Robel, drenched in sweat, and the others came up. Ershi was not among them.

“Robel, where’s Ershi?”

“She said she needed to check on Marsun’s condition herself to be sure. She’ll be up in a bit.”

Responding to Marty’s question, Robel reported to Yuder.

“Marsun has completely calmed down and just fell asleep again. We’ve used up all the medicine you gave us, though…”

“I told you that’s okay.”

“Yes… still… Phew. Anyway, it’s all over now.”

Yuder nodded, indicating that he too felt Marsun’s scent had calmed. The Cavalry members wiped their sweat and patted each other’s shoulders. Yuder instructed them to periodically administer sedatives and tranquilizers to ensure Marsun’s condition didn’t worsen.

After finishing everything, they stepped outside to see the setting sun. They had spent more time in the prison than they had thought. As Yuder turned his head, he locked eyes with Nathan Zuckerman, who was outside the prison gate with loaded horses. It seemed Kishiar hadn’t just come here on a whim.

‘So he came prepared to leave right away.’

“I’m going to go now. See you next time.”

“Wait… are you leaving already?”

Catching onto Yuder’s intention to depart, Robel expressed his surprise.

“You’re leaving so soon…”

“Thank you so much for your help this time!”

Marty quickly bowed in gratitude, and Robel followed the gesture. As they were about to leave, Yuder felt someone's gaze on him. Turning, he saw Ershi, not far away, staring at him. With arms crossed, Ershi silently watched him and then spoke.

"…Just as Jim said. It seemed as if a black tail had been attached to your back since you first appeared."

"…"

"Consider Marsun's debt repaid with this."

With those words, Ershi turned away.

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Chapter 610

“A black tail?”

“Who is Jim?”

Yuder and Kishiar muttered their questions simultaneously before turning their heads. The moment their eyes met, Robel and Marty rushed over and began speaking.

“Jim is a prisoner working with Ershi! He was one of the two people who accompanied me earlier to the Cavalry building to help move Onel”

“I heard he has the ability to spot other people’s weaknesses and attack accordingly. I suspect Ershi mentioned it in relation to that.”

Yuder quickly sorted through the torrent of words in his mind.

‘Now that I hear it, I do remember. Ershi had specifically called Jim and Peter to go help Robel. So, is it that Jim observed me and reported it to Ershi?’

According to the two, Jim’s specific ability seemed more akin to scrutinizing another person’s state and identifying anything out of the ordinary.

That ‘out of the ordinary’ range was surprisingly broad; sometimes Jim could pinpoint a comrade’s pain point and other times identify invisible abilities that other Awakeners had used. Yuder roughly guessed what Ershi had been getting at.

‘They often say a black tail sticks to someone when they’re being secretly trailed. So that means’

“Someone has been using tracking abilities to discreetly target us,” Kishiar voiced Yuder’s thoughts precisely.

Jim had claimed to have seen a black tail attached to Yuder from the first time they met. That suggested there had already been tracking in place before he entered the underground dungeon.

‘It didn’t happen in the East, so it must have been in the West. There are only two possibilities for that.’

Either a traitor existed among the comrades in the Western Branch, or one of the recent test candidates had done something. However, Yuder considered the likelihood of a traitor among his comrades to be extremely low.

‘None of the members in the division have tracking-related abilities.’

If they were to pull something like this off, they would have needed external help. And being able to do such a bold act without catching Yuder’s eye from within was frankly unbelievable.

An internal traitor would more likely attempt assassination, which is faster and simpler. Therefore, the most probable person to have discreetly tailed Yuder was likely among the numerous Western test candidates.

‘During the test, so many energies were erupting everywhere that even I couldn’t keep track of them all One lucky individual could’ve taken advantage of that to attach a tail.’

Reaching his conclusion, Yuder lifted his head. His dark eyes flickered like those of a predator.

“Considering the enemy hasn’t revealed themselves despite tagging us, they must have been waiting for our numbers to dwindle

before making a move. However, now that we're aware of this, things have turned out quite well."

Thanks to Gloe's blessing, their departure was delayed by a day, disrupting their original schedule. That allowed for today's events to unfold during their visit to the underground dungeon.

It was fortunate that, of all places, someone with the ability to see the tail attached to Yuder was here. And it was lucky that Ershi, who knew this information, chose to share it as a form of payment for saving a comrade.

'Could this have been the blessing meant to protect me?'

Emun had received a blessing to ward off falling stones from above his head, but not all blessings manifested in such ways. Yuder momentarily pushed aside thoughts of the unknown blessing's power and glanced around the exceptionally tranquil street as usual.

"There's no need to make a big deal here. I think it would be best to go out and see their faces ourselves," he suggested.

"Agreed. Let's do that," Kishiar complied, his face suggesting he had already anticipated Yuder's conclusion. They immediately mounted their horses and headed to where Nathan Zuckerman was waiting. Before leaving, Kishiar called over Robel and Marty, asking them to deliver a message to Emun, the Western Branch Leader.

"Find out the current location of those who ran away without notice just before the second test and those Yuder had directly witnessed. Tell them to chase after any suspicious individuals. Keep the frequency of our contact as before."

"Understood. We will relay your message!"

"Leave it to us."

Yuder quickly pulled the reins as he caught a fleeting glimpse of the two departing figures. No sooner had their trio of horses exited Tainu, than shadowy figures in a secluded inn in Tainu started to stir.

“The Black Monster and his group have finally left Tainu! There are three of them!”

“Good. Remember the advice we received yesterday from the sage serving under Baron Renbow. Wait as long as possible without being detected, and follow them carefully after sunset.”

As Yuder and Kishiar had suspected, they were all individuals who had either been eliminated by Yuder during the second test or had opted out, fearing their identities had been exposed. Not a hint of anxiety could be seen in the eyes of these dozen or so menacing figures.

Among them was Seeker, an Awakener whom Yuder had personally eliminated during the second exam.

“That damned monster. He’ll soon find out that breaking your neck and dying in the harsh mountains of the West isn’t uncommon.”

Groups of suspicious individuals dispersed, each heading out of different city gates of Tainu.

The oblivious city remained as peaceful as ever.

“We’ll head to a small village called Pofuan first, where Crown Prince Katchian had refined mushrooms,” Kishiar informed as he effortlessly led the way through the dark forest. Horses were unsuitable for the dark forest, so they were all walking.

However, due to their abilities far surpassing average humans, their walking speed was exceptionally fast.

“We’ll have to veer off this path and go through the Guanamar Mountains. If our attackers are trailing us, it might be wise to slow down near the entrance and wait for them,” Kishiar added.

“A spot where the enemy would lower their guard, thinking they have the advantage. A perfect place for an ambush,” Yuder mumbled, prompting a smile from Kishiar.

“Exactly, very textbook. But don’t offer to act as a decoy or anything of that sort.”

Yuder paused, exactly on the verge of suggesting just that.

“Why? I’m the one being chased; it makes sense for me to cause the distraction.”

“The scent emanating from you has intensified since we left Tainu. Didn’t you notice?”

Yuder’s eyes twitched. He raised his hand and sniffed his palm but couldn’t discern any difference.

“I can’t tell,” he admitted.

“If you’re not aware of it yourself, then for now, it’s probably fine. But it’s still better to be cautious. If bait is needed, I’ll volunteer.”

“Really?”

“Ever since I’ve found out how much my adjutant and assistant were concerned about me, to the point of pausing their work, I ought to demonstrate my own resilience to ease their worries.”

“…”

A chilling silence settled in the air following Kishiar’s softly muttered words. Yuder’s eyes swiftly darted, and upon meeting Nathan Zuckerman’s gaze, the man subtly exhaled.

Through this, Yuder was certain that during his absence, Kishiar, who had woken up from sleep, had heard from Nathan Zuckerman on whatever had transpired between the loyal knight and the assistant.

It didn't seem that Yuder was surprised or disappointed, but the fact that Kishiar would willingly take on the most dangerous task just to prove 'there's no need to worry about me,' was breathtakingly like him.

"Let's use our strength wisely, extract information after capturing them, and then bury their faces in the groundarrange them in a way that makes it easier for those in the base to pick them up."

"Understood."

Hearing the somber replies from Nathan and Yuder, Kishiar broke into a smile.

At that moment, an incongruous twinge of unease briefly fluttered within Yuder's chest and then disappeared.

Yuder thought that Kishiar's mood would have been somewhat subdued, given the fact that his hidden past had been exposed and he now knew how he died in his previous life.

But look at that face. Not a shadow of what Yuder had expected was there. Rather, Kishiar's face seemed more radiant, more relaxed than before.

This wasn't Kishiar pretending that nothing had happened. To Yuder, it felt quite the opposite.

The crimson eyes that glanced at Yuder while uttering 'to ease their worries' conveyed a silent message, clear in their intent'there's no need to worry about me due to yesterday's events.'

How could Yuder argue against that?

Kishiar was the type of person who emitted an unexpected light, even when one would expect him to be at his darkest. And because of that, Yuder found himself once again without regret for yesterday's decision.

"The sounds are getting closer."

Finally, they reached the mountain's entrance. Even without Nathan Zuckermans words, Yuder had already sensed the presence of approaching humans through the wind.

"There are eighteen people in total. Some of them are moving rather quickly. Perhaps they possess speed-enhancing abilities."

Kishiar voiced much more detailed information than Nathan Zuckerman had. There wasn't a hint of tension in his voice.

"Their abilities will be hampered in terrains with many obstacles. Using the mountain's features, we can capture them quickly."

"Good to know. Thank you. Alright, prepare yourselves. They'll be here soon."

With a brief expression of gratitude for Yuders information, Kishiar raised his hand to signal.

Almost immediately, several shadows, like flashes of light, swooped down and landed with a thud. They were carrying comrades on their backs, and one of them precisely pinpointed Yuders location and shouted,

"Over there!"

"Finally, we meet again! You monster of the Cavalry."

"Who are you? How did you follow me?"

Pretending to not know what you already do is a difficult task. Thankfully, the darkness veiled any awkwardness, and the enemies chuckled, obliging with an answer.

“You’re surprised to see an Awakener with tracking skills as exceptional as mine, aren’t you? Do you have any idea how much trouble I went through to set up this trap? You could’ve died quickly if I had just dealt with you then and there. Now, because of your trivial schemes, remember that you’ll die in even more pain and at a later time.”

“Do you think youll tell me who sent you?”

“Of course not. What would a man about to die do with that information?”

“Exactly. It doesn’t matter, as I’ll find out soon enough. Now, one last question.”

“Find out soon? Are you insane? What are you talking about?”

“Seems like you’re too scared to think straight.”

At Yuder’s composed demeanor, the enemies let out incredulous laughs. Even as they did, more of their comrades, who had arrived a bit late, were steadily joining them.

Regardless, Yuder spoke unwaveringly.

“Is there anyone here willing to surrender and say something nice? Come out and kneel within the count of three, and I’ll spare just that one person.”

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Chapter 611

“Is there anyone here willing to surrender and say something nice? Come out and kneel within the count of three, and I’ll spare just that one person.”

Suddenly, the atmosphere around them shifted ominously. A chilling winter wind swept between the enemies and Yuder, leaving a void in its wake.

“What did he just say?”

“Spare who?”

“Is he serious? What’s wrong with his eyes?”

The enemies finally lost their laughter. Among them, Yuder noticed one individual glaring intently at him. The gaze was filled with hateful vengeance, and it felt strangely familiar.

‘Seeker. So he’s part of this group, too.’

In his previous life, Seeker was a scoundrel, but he never moved in groups like this. Some things had changed, but the essence of some remained the same, Yuder realized.

‘Actually, this is better. I wasn’t satisfied merely warning him last time.’

Silently, Yuder lifted three fingers. All eyes converged on his hand.

‘One. Two.’

As he folded down the first and second fingers, not surprisingly, no one stepped forward to kneel. Only the sound of restrained breathing and escalating tension filled the air.

Folding down his last finger, Yuder quickly scanned the enemies' formation.

'Three.'

"Kill him!"

At someone's loud shout, energy surged through Yuder as well.

"Ugh!"

"What the?"

Those who attempted to charge at Yuder found themselves tripping and falling, as if they'd been yanked back by invisible threads. While they writhed and screamed on the ground, a cold, deliberate voice echoed from the hill above.

"You all look quite fitting, kneeling."

Only then did the mercenaries realize that Yuder had manipulated the earth to grasp their feet. So engrossed were they in his words and counting fingers, that even those confident in their speed and agility had no chance but to tumble. Seeker, gripping the ground in fury, shouted obscenities.

"Damn you! I will definitely be the one to take your head What?"

"Where did he go?"

Yuder, who had clearly been in front of them just moments ago, had disappeared. Two other men who were with him had vanished as well.

“Damn it! He’s escaped. Chase him!”

“Hold on. My feet are still stuck!”

“Idiot! Just take off your shoes!”

Amidst the chaos, those who managed to free themselves sprinted towards where Yuder had been. Though they didnt see him, footprints remained trampled in the bushes.

A rustling sound of someone fleeing came from a not-so-distant locationopposite to where the footprints led.

“There!”

Those with keen ears chased after the sound.

“That noise is definitely a trap. The real trail is the footprints!”

Others followed the footprints in the opposite direction.

In a situation where their prey had escaped, the only thought crossing their minds was one:

‘I must be the one to catch him first!’

So engrossed were they in this single-minded pursuit that they momentarily forgot about the most important person of all: the mercenary who had used tracking skills to successfully lead them to Yuder.

“ChChChoke! YuYuder, ah”

“Be quiet.”

Yuder descended from the tallest tree after everyone had been lured away by Kishiar and Nathan Zuckerman. The moment he waved his hand, the ground below, marred by the fallen

mercenaries, split open. A face emerged from the earth, half-buried in the soil. The man, who looked small and frail and seemed far from suited for combat, had been the one using his tracking abilities to follow Yuder.

When everyone else had fallen, he'd been entirely buried underground, unable to even scream as he was entombed alive. However, thanks to the ensuing chase, the other mercenaries hadnt noticed he was buried and had all left, an astounding oversight.

The tracker trembled, spitting out a mouthful of dirt.

He never thought he'd be captured so easily just after finding Yuder Aile. He had no fighting skills to speak of, but he believed the other mercenaries would protect him. What a fantasy that was.

'No. Once they realize I'm missing, they'll all come back. If I can just pretend to cooperate until then…!'

Before he could complete his thought, a foot stomped down on his shoulder, pushing him back into the ground. He felt the slow but excruciating sensation of his shoulder bone breaking.

"Aaargh!"

A cold voice murmured above his writhing form, as if reading his thoughts.

"Dont bother scheming. The ones youre waiting for won't be coming back."

"What, what are you…

Then, from somewhere, a dreadful scream echoed, only to abruptly cut off. Similar screams followed from different directions but quickly ceased.

The tracker tensed up.

They had only focused on Yuder Ailes presence, not caring much about the two men accompanying him. Even their employer hadnt informed them of this detail.

But this situation…

“Wait, just wait. I surrender. No, I mean, I truly surrender. Ill even disable my tracking, just please spare me!”

“Who said anything about needing that?”

A foot swiftly landed on his head again. Although it wasn’t weighted, he was certain that if any force was applied, he would be buried once more.

“If you wanted to live, you had three seconds to surrender. That opportunity is long gone.”

As Yuder’s foot pressed down, the tracker felt his body sinking into the ground like a quagmire. The pressure seemed to crush his skull and neck, giving the illusion that they were shattering.

“Ah Uh Cough!”

As he tried to scream, dirt and gravel invaded his open mouth, stifling the sound.

“There’s only one reason I’ve come to deal with you first.”

The tracker barely managed to lift his tear-soaked eyes.

Yuder, who showed neither anger nor any other emotion one would expect in such a situation, looked utterly alien. The cold, metallic glint in one of his golden eyes, gleaming in the darkness, was terrifying beyond belief.

His well-honed instincts screamed. This man had done things like this more than once or twice. He didn’t even blink at the sound of human screams, and clearly knew how to inflict pain precisely as he desired.

Only those who had taken lives recklessly could wear such an expression.

‘Impossible. How could someone barely twenty years old!’

In a cold that could make even a seasoned mercenary shiver, a voice akin to the god of death finally spoke its last words.

“Tell me everything you know about your abilities and your client.”

‘I’ve dealt with the most annoying one first, at least.’

Yuder ran through the trees, leaving behind the Awakener who had fainted and broken his neck after Yuder buried his head in the ground. As Yuder leaped off branches, leaves brushed against his cheeks.

It was an obvious choice to take care of the tracker first. Even if he had gotten lucky, anyone with the power to track him was someone worth understanding.

‘That way, if another one shows up later, I won’t fall for it so easily, and if someone like that joins my team, I’ll know how to train them.’

In his previous life, he had defeated those who came to kill him and effectively utilized the unique abilities of those with interesting powers for the advancement of his Cavalry.

Though it was regrettable that he hadn’t learned anything valuable about the client from the pathetic tracker he had just taken down, it was something he could look into later.

‘Kishiar and Nathan Zuckerman must still be in the process of taking care of everyone.’

The decision to divide the enemies was Kishiar’s idea. It was the best way to keep the identities and abilities of Kishiar and Nathan Zuckerman a secret while ensuring that no one outside would ever find out what had happened.

Even if Kanna Wand were to show up, it would be hard to decipher what had actually happened. And so, this was a battle that reflected the fact that they were fighting ‘Awakeners.

Yuder, recalling Kishiar’s orders that had perfectly showcased ‘his own health,’ felt a deep satisfaction both as a former cavalry commander accustomed to such battles, and as someone who cares for and loves Kishiar.

At that moment, signs of someone’s presence were felt from not too far away.

‘Finally, they’re here. Let’s see…two of them?’

Yuder jumped down from the tree and unsheathed his sword. He walked gracefully towards the source of the noise, eventually disappearing into the darkness of the forest.

“…”

Again, a presence vanished nearby. Seeker huddled in a bush, shivering, and then emerged, grinding his teeth.

His hands kept shaking, even though he didn’t want them to. The hilt of his dagger was sweaty, and he had to wipe it on his clothes.

His body was overwhelmed with unbearable anger and fear.

‘What the hell… What is happening?’

He thought everything was going well when he had first located Yuder Aile. Even after Yuder disappeared, he believed things were fine.

But as they chased Yuder’s footsteps, he realized one by one, their numbers were dwindling. Someone was picking them off.

They had searched as a group, but their enemy was elusive as a ghost. Some, doubting their companions, had sprinted off alone only to vanish moments later, leaving behind only their screams.

It felt like they were ensnared by something. In the dark forest, they couldn’t even tell where they were.

Staggering, he tripped over a tree root.

“Ugh…!”

Unable to make a sound, he tumbled and rolled on the ground until he abruptly came to a halt. When he lifted his head, the sight that met his eyes was the body of another mercenarya man he’d thought had vanished earlier.

“!”

A closer look would have revealed that the man was still breathing, but to Seeker, his fear-distorted vision saw only a corpse riddled with wounds. As he tried to retreat, he realized that the dagger he had been holding had also disappeared.

“Damn it! Where did it go? My sword. My dagger!”

“Here it is.”

At that moment, someone placed a sword in his hand. Seeker instinctively grasped it, experiencing a fleeting moment of relief before a cold dread raced down his spine. He turned to look.

A stranger, wearing an unfamiliar face, gazed down at him and offered a silent, gentle smile.

“Who Who are you?”

“When the environment changes, some people change and some don’t. Seeing as you’re back here, despite having had a chance to escape, I reckon you belong to the latter group.”

The man’s voice was so calm and melodious that it felt as if they had been conversing for a long time. But Seeker quickly snapped back to reality and aimed his dagger.

“What the hell are you talking about? You’re from the Cavalry, arent you?”

“Why do you think such differences occur?”

“Goddamn it! I asked if you’re from the Cavalry!”

“The answer remains unknown, but one thing is certain.”

Ignoring Seeker’s protests, the man calmly raised his hand.

“I don’t want to become like that.”

The last thing Seeker remembered was seeing a small orb of light condensing at the man’s fingertips. Accompanied by excruciating pain that coursed through his entire body, Seeker dropped the dagger and collapsed right then and there.

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Chapter 612

Yuder looked down at the unconscious men whose heads alone protruded from the ground. As per Kishiar's orders, he had dealt with these men harshly and buried them partially in the ground. The sight wasn't particularly pleasing; it made his eyes sore and filled him with fatigue.

"Still, there was something to gain from these men."

These were the same rogues who had fled the second phase of the tests as soon as they heard that Yuder had sent Seeker away. Quick on the uptake, they had a good deal of information about their client and the situation at hand.

According to them, not everyone who had gathered there had initially come to take the recruitment test with Yuder as their target. Most were mercenaries who had decided to quit their jobs and aim for admission to the Cavalry purely on merit. Up to that point, they had no intention of getting involved in anything like this.

However, once they applied, they realized there was intense competition, and their rough background as mercenaries did them no favors. Who wouldn't prefer applicants with a cleaner record and a better family background? News that even nobles with awakened abilities were applying to the Cavalry fueled their anxiety and disillusionment.

It was at this time of unease that a servant of the 'client' approached them in the taverns and lodgings frequented by mercenaries. The client was a noble in the capital who claimed he needed inside information from the Cavalry and wanted to help them pass the tests.

So these are the men who took that offer.

The client assisted the mercenaries by erasing their pasts and even writing their applications for them. For a while, everything seemed to be going smoothly as they passed the first phase of the tests.

But that was short-lived. Yuder began his culling process, starting with Seeker, and the path to passing the second phase became increasingly narrow for them. Those who failed or fled were given a new mission by the client.

The mission was to track down or kill Yuder Aile, the rising star and emerging hero of the Cavalry, who was discovered to be in the West.

Up until that point, the mercenaries thought they were the only ones who had taken the job. But upon accepting the second mission, they were shocked to learn that there were others like them.

Someone introduced by the client, whom he called the “sage,” taught them how to fight against Yuder, who was strong enough to take on a monster the size of a house on his own.

The sage knew quite a lot about Yuder’s abilities, including his skill in swordsmanship and his power to harness the forces of nature. He told them, “Among you, there are those who may be weak in combat but excel in tracking. Since he successfully infiltrated the second phase test site and used his abilities, follow Yuder Aile when he leaves the West. You may each be weaker than him, but there’s strength in numbers. Even a mouse can beat a lion if it has help. And so”

Despite not knowing his face or name, they felt a deep sense of trust in his words. The 18 mercenaries decided to focus their efforts on harming Yuder rather than regretting the Cavalry tests they had already failed.

They revealed that the client who had directly approached them was Baron Renbow. Yuder had previously heard this name thanks to Eldore siblings and Gakane when they had searched the sage's dwelling.

A noble who frequents the sage's dwelling and doesn't hesitate to offer support. Given how closely he's involved with the sage, and his behavior he must have been brainwashed by now.

The sage was aware of Yuder's abilities because he had heard from the Awakeners belonging to the Star of Nagran, both in the East and the West, who had previously witnessed Yuder's prowess. Yuder had often wondered how different the sage was from Nahan, and today, he felt that he could draw a conclusion.

He doesn't share the same beliefs as Nahan. But he's certainly not a pacifist either.

While Nahan may be crazy, he would not have used other Awakeners to attack him first in such a situation. Nahan's primary target had always been the detestable non-awakener nobles.

Would the Star of Nagran know that the sage, whom everyone hailed as virtuous, had lent his voice to the plans to first harm Yuder Aile for the sake of Duke Diarca? A cold smirk surfaced in Yuder's eyes.

If it were me, the real heavy hitters would be prepped in the South. This would merely be a test using Renbow as bait. He probably got curious when he unexpectedly heard about my presence and wanted to prod me a little. Otherwise, he wouldn't have used mercenaries, who are expendable.

The audacity to proceed hinged on the belief that, even if this plan failed, Yuder and his troop would not have fully grasped the true identities of the sage and Renbow.

Unfortunately for you, we already know about you.

One of the men captured by Yuder mentioned that, before losing consciousness completely, the sage had left behind a few Awakeners and whispered something further. They had been excluded from that information, so he would have to find someone else who knew. Such was the hastiness of their alliance; they barely even remembered each other's names and details.

Whatever he whispered to just a few, whether it's about me or other information, I'll have to find out.

It was becoming increasingly difficult to sense the remaining men, as if they were wrapping things up. It was so quiet that not even the sound of an ant could be heard.

Kishiar and Nathan Zuckerman must be somewhere nearby, but their absence of presence was remarkable in its own way. Yuder momentarily set aside the fact that he himself was also one of those without a traceable presence and sank into thought.

If they're hard to find, the best method would be to use bait from our side to draw them out, but

Kishiar had explicitly told Yuder not to use himself as bait. So Yuder quickly relinquished the idea.

What could he do? If Kishiar preferred another route, then that was the only way to go.

… If only the heat period wasn't approaching.

The reason for Kishiar's opposition flashed across his mind, and a deep sigh involuntarily escaped him. When he inhaled again, Yuder suddenly sensed a slightly unfamiliar yet faint scent. It was similar to the sour smell wafting from an old barrel of wine.

Could this foul scent possibly be his? Doubting, he brought his wrist up to his nose. Just then, rustling sounds came from behind him.

“Uh… Haah… Haah… Found you…”

A mercenary, injured all over, mumbled as he glared at Yuder.

“You’re the monster of the Cavalry, an Omega… You’re the one with the female scent… Yes… You’re the only one… I found you first!”

The moment the man opened his mouth, Yuder smelled an unmistakably pungent and sour odor. It was the same scent he had just smelled. A rough, intense aroma was emanating from the man in waves.

Alpha Awakener.

The moment he recognized its identity, he furrowed his brows.

“I know. You’re in heat, aren’t you? No matter how much you try to hide it, this scent… it’s impossible to conceal. I have a keen nose… I’m indeed lucky!”

Thud.

A pulsating sensation, as if his entire body was being struck, resonated. Suddenly, a scent burst forth from Yuder’s body.

What the

The scent, which seemed to want to push away an unwelcome intruder immediately, ignored its owner’s will and aggressively clashed with the opposing scent. Yuder quickly tried to suppress it, but it refused to obey.

He felt a sudden dizziness, as if all his strength was being drained. The scent, which he hadn’t even been aware of until now, seemed to be emanating from every pore in his body.

The rising heat, cold sweat, and an invisible chill enveloped him. Yuder’s sword fell from his hand. He leaned against a nearby tree, gasping for breath.

“Ugh…”

Simultaneously, the wounded mercenary who had been staggering towards Yuder collapsed to the ground, his face a picture of surprise.

His scent had become much stronger than before, but it was too weak and limited in range to counter Yuder’s. The man’s eyes rolled back, and blood vessels burst, turning them bright red. His pants began to dampen, and a pungent odor, different from urine, wafted from the liquid.

Yuder knew what it was.

It was the thick and abundant seminal fluid that an Alpha, upon encountering an Omega in heat, would release much more than usual.

The repulsive sour scent mixed with the acrid smell of the fluid assaulted Yuder. He reflexively tried to summon the power of the wind to dispel it.

“…”

But only a faint breeze stirred. Neither fire, water, nor earth responded to his call. The more he tried, the more he felt a suffocating sensation, as if a spring had been blocked, causing pain that seemed to constrict his heart.

Why now of all times?

Most Awakeners couldn’t use their powers properly when they had just entered their heat. Everything except their instincts seemed to be dormant, and for some, even their memories became hazy, making it hard to control their strength. They were naturally vulnerable to external attacks.

But Yuder had never seen a case where even a tiny bit of power couldn’t be exerted.

It’s my first real heat period since I don’t remember the first manifestation clearly, so how could I know.

While he could fend off visible attacks, the repugnant scent that he felt through his nose and skin had no solution other than to distance himself. Yuder, struggling to suppress his uncontrollable scent, staggered backward.

As he moved away, the mercenary on the ground writhed and reached out.

“Khh… Khh…”

His eyes no longer saw reason; only a burning lust remained. That desire, which Yuder might not have noticed under normal circumstances, was now perceived as sharp as a blade. The instinct to pin down the retreating Omega gave the wounded man a mysterious surge of energy.

With surprising speed, he crawled on the ground, reaching out to grab Yuder’s ankle. As the opponent’s scent drew closer, the explosive scent from Yuder’s body went wild.

Struggling to maintain his balance as if he could collapse at any moment, Yuder grasped a nearby tree and located the sword he had dropped. Fortunately, it had not rolled all the way down the sloping

hill; it lay caught at the edge. With a wobbly gait, he turned back toward it.

Just as the frenzied hand of the Alpha Awakener lunged to seize his heel, Yuder also managed to grasp the hilt of his sword as he fell to the ground.

“Gh… ah!”

Before the man could hurl himself at Yuder, he let out a scream, impaled by the sword that Yuder had thrust down upon him. Gripping the hilt that had penetrated through the man’s back and abdomen, Yuder plunged the sword deeper into the ground without hesitation, resisting the heat that surged through his entire body. His hands and body were soaked in blood, mingled with the acrid scent of iron.

‘Even if I can’t exert my strength due to the heat period, thinking I can’t handle a scum like you would be a grave mistake.’

Invisible scents wafted in the space between the man trying to hold on despite his pain and the one stabbing him with a sword. A lethal intent radiated between his narrowed eyes. Yuder didn’t let go of the sword until the mercenary finally released his foot. Only then did he manage to rise shakily to his feet.

He took a few steps but was suddenly engulfed by an immense heat, far greater than anything he had felt before.

””

Yuder swayed and collapsed. He tumbled unceremoniously down the sloping hill where his sword had earlier lain.

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Chapter 613

His consciousness was in disarray. The darkness before his eyes flickered like an endless night sky, intermittently lit by countless constellations passing by.

Yuder felt as if he was falling, infinitely down, in a state of dulled senses.

He recognized this sensation. While it was absent in his cognitive understanding, his body remembered the experience it had undergone before.

A searing, chaotic heat engulfed him. Instincts that had always been suppressed by cold rationality now welcomed this sweet flame wholeheartedly. It was a moment when these primal senses became the ruling force within him.

His parched body absorbed moisture, swelling with newfound vitality. Heat lingered in his hair, tickling his sensitive skin as it fluttered.

You already know this heat, a whispering flame crawled along Yuder’s skin, settling near his ear.

Remember.

Remember it

As if led by a summons, both unfamiliar and familiar memories surfaced within Yuder’s field of vision.

AhAh…!

A dizzying moan tore through his ears. The voice was rough and ragged but simultaneously stimulating something in the listener.

Mixed with that voice were sounds of wet flesh grinding and colliding, accompanied by the faint cries of wood, all echoing in a labored, rhythmic panting.

Lost in the sounds, Yuder belatedly realized that those moans were his own, escaping from his lips. And he also realized where he was.

He was in the Commander's office of the Cavalry. He was sprawled face down on a large desk cluttered with scattered papers and ink bottles. Each time a hot force penetrated between his legs from behind, his legs, unable to find a stable footing, wavered uncontrollably.

Something too large was thrusting into him, making it almost impossible to breathe. It felt like a club pounding inside him, violently jumping about. His chest was compressed, gasping for breath, but his melted senses offered no response.

The blurred view of the Commander's office came into focus. Not just the desk, but the entire room was in complete disarray. The sofa had sunk in and torn open, revealing its innards. Shreds of clothing lay about the floor like rags. Fragments of what might once have been a teacup were scattered, leaving no clue to their original form.

And filling the room was an overpowering aroma and viscous liquid, tracing a path from the sofa to the floor, bookshelves, and finally near the desk where he was bent over.

Why did the traces of that path feel like screams?

What had happened here?

Just as he reached that thought, another hot force slammed into him from behind. It went deeper than it should have, bulging his lower belly, finally making contact with his buttocks with a smacking sound.

“!”

At that impossibly deep penetration, his lips involuntarily parted and he let out another sound. His mind went blank.

How could he possibly feel this sensation while still alive?

If he wasn’t dying, then there was no way to explain this experience. Absurd thoughts flashed by meaninglessly, like lightning, before exploding.

“Ah!”

A scream that chilled him to the very tips of his hair. His muscles tightened in his tensed arms. Fingers that delicately scratched the desk’s surface lost their strength due to the sudden withdrawal, and he gave in.

Yuder could no longer look around. Once he had delved deep, he repeatedly made his way through the doors that kept opening. Every time his stomach felt pierced, his vision flashed, and he couldn’t even discern the sounds coming from his own mouth.

The overwhelming pressure, the sharp pain of something that was always closed now opening. But amidst all that, there was a sensation he had never felt before. It was pleasure.

This unexpected pleasure, originating from an unknown place, gripped his body and mind at the most unpredictable moments. Every time it surged, Yuder convulsed in shock. This intense, unfamiliar sensation made his rationality shrink back, allowing his instincts to skillfully take over.

He moved as naturally as a fish in water, actively harmonizing with the force that sought to dominate him. Every time he felt the shock, his stomach tightened, and the organ between his legs pulsed, releasing fluid. Even though he wanted to avoid the intruder that roughly pushed its way into the deepest part of him, his instincts instead made him push his hips back even harder.

As Yuder pressed his lower body back, he felt that whatever had penetrated him was moving beyond his stomach, rising higher and higher. The sensation, as if piercing through his heart, throat, and brain, was almost violent.

As he pushed his hips and panted, the heat from behind grew closer. He felt a breath, hotter than his own, near his nape. Every time their skins fully touched and then separated, a strange sensation, neither pleasure nor pain, overcame him.

Now, the sounds he made were more akin to mating beasts than human. Unable to resist the overwhelming sensations, he closed his eyes and trembled. Saliva smeared messily, wetting his lips and chin like a starving person.

“Ah, ah, ah, h, uh…!”

The climax was nearing again. Despite experiencing it multiple times, the end always brought the same fear.

He felt as if he was being pulled endlessly to some high place, that escalating sensation. Even though he didn’t want to go, a part of him anticipated something, making his insides twitch.

It was truly inexplicable. How could his body move in the direction of the pain and fear he felt?

Unable to withstand the violent shaking, Yuder screamed, arching his back and neck. As he thrashed his head, the person behind him

reached out, supporting his waist and chest, pulling him closer. The hands were firm enough to trust, even in their urgency.

A long, beautiful hand with a half-removed white glove.

Though consumed by the same passion, the trembling hand seemed to be in pain. The moment Yuder looked down at it, his forehead creased like lightning. For a brief moment, his lost rationality and thoughts awakened from somewhere deep within, overshadowed by pleasure.

He felt a suffocating sensation, as if his throat was being strangled.

It was the pain of a naive and awkward emotion dying. He didn’t know what he had hoped for, but he knew he hadn’t wished for this, and thus, a mournful moan escaped him.

An immense pleasure consumed him, but Yuder’s deeply sunken eyes darkened even more. As he limply let his body sway, the man holding him leaned down, pressing his lips to Yuder’s neck.

Even as his body jerked roughly, the slowly touching lips absorbed the sweat on Yuder’s face, the saliva, and even the tears that fell from below his eyes.

In a manner unbecoming, Yuder’s body trembled at the careful, yet strenuous movement of their lips.

Their hearts palpitated in inexplicable harmony, a faint light passing between their conjoined bodies. Yet, neither of them realized this phenomenon.

Moments later, their trembling bodies began to fuse at an unprecedented speed. Bright flashes filled Yuder’s mind, and with the illusion of hearing the sound of their deepest selves being pierced, Yuder relinquished all control, surrendering fully to the other.

It felt as if their body was wholly devouring the other.

Everything seemed to converge into a murky death here and now.

Yet, amidst this obliteration, something within him refused to die, instead melting and flowing toward the other. And from the man who embraced Yuder, something molten trickled into Yuder as well.

Instinctively, Yuder opened himself up to it. A thirst he had not even been aware of seemed to lessen the moment it was accepted. He opened his parched lips in a gasp, and the other delved inside him once more, this time with even more fervor.

His mind went blank. He wanted nothing more than to be further entangled. They slipped off the desk, half-crashing to the floor, sprawling over a chair.

It was an act as primal as any, but no longer did pain have any place in it. Yuder, who had been moaning freely, suddenly heard approaching footsteps. The other must have heard them too. Yet neither made a move to escape. In a world where shame and reason had evaporated, the approach of another was inconsequential.

Moments later, the door burst open. After sweeping their gaze over the chaotic room, the eyes of Nathan Zuckerman settled into despondency. As a last note, Yuder’s consciousness began to fade away into the distance again…

When Yuder next came to, he found himself in a familiar imperial bedroom. He watched, as if from a far-off place, his own body writhing frantically on the bed of the small palace where Kishiar had spent his childhood.

“The fever is too high. We’ve given him painkillers and antipyretics three times, and it still hasn’t gone down. Why is this happening…”

“Since the Princeno, the Dukehasn’t arrived yet, we have no answers. Bring more water and towels to wipe off the sweat!”

This was not a past life. Yuder realized he was reliving the day of his second gender manifestation, a day also marked by a sexual heat he could hardly contain.

Elderly servants scurried to wipe sweat from Yuder’s face and body. But his physical form continued to writhe, making tiny moans of agony, and moved restlessly.

The movements suggested a horrifying pain, one made all the more terrifying by his inability to scream. One of the servants clucked his tongue and shook his head.

“It seems as though he’s battling some invisible deity. His teeth are grinding so badly we should get him something to bite on.”

Yuder dimly remembered the agony of the second gender manifestation, feeling as though his bones were breaking and reassembling.

The servants might not have noticed, but Yuder felt an overpowering scent filling the bedroom. A scent that had never been tamed since his birth began to freely swirl around him, gradually taking form.

“…What’s the situation?”

Then, a voice came from not too far away. It was Kishiar’s voice.

Yuder saw a man in exquisite formal attire, tense from head to toe, staring past the bedroom. There was no smile on Kishiar’s face.

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Chapter 614

“I apologize… I have done my best to change the guest’s clothes and wiped away the sweat, even administered the fever reducer three times, but the fever has not subsided. He seemed to be in severe pain, so I gave him painkillers as well, but there has been no improvement yet…”

Two attendants alternately bowed their heads as they reported Yuder’s condition to Kishiar.

Due to an intense fever and pain of unknown origin, Yuder was constantly drenched in sweat. Despite their diligent care and repeated medication, Yuder’s suffering appeared to remain unabated, with the fever blossoming over time and even emitting a strange scent from his entire body.

This scent was utterly unlike the musty smell common when ordinary people sweat. Nor did it resemble the fragrance of perfumes used by noblewomen. There are monsters that emit all sorts of scents to lure their prey, but how could such an odd fragrance emanate from a healthy person? Even the experienced attendants, who had weathered numerous incidents in the palace, could not maintain their composure in the face of this situation.

“It seems we may need to call a physician… What should we do?”

Hearing the attendants’ report, Kishiar’s gaze turned continuously towards the trembling figure.

Yuder saw Kishiar’s hand, which had briefly twitched as if to move in his direction, disappear into a tight fist a moment later.

“Calling a doctor would be futile. This is a symptom that only occurs in Awakeners who are experiencing a second gender manifestation.”

“Is this manifestation really such a serious matter?”

Noticing Kishiar’s knowledge of a second gender manifestation, a fleeting look of sorrow passed through the eyes of the aged attendants. Kishiar smiled, as if to reassure them.

“Not at all. It seems my assistant’s manifestation process is simply more intense than others. The heat and the scent may be due to an overlapping heat period, making it more painful.”

It was not common, but it wasn’t necessarily abnormal. Just as insects shed their exoskeletons at varying speeds, the process of something new forming was naturally arduous. But this state does not persist post-transformation. Once the shedding is complete, maturity is attained. Kishiar jokingly lightened the mood, presenting himself as living proof. The attendants finally relaxed their expressions and laughed along.

“Indeed, after undergoing awakening, Your Grace returned much more formidable and mature. Anyway, it is a relief that you say so…”

“But Your Grace, is there a reason you keep standing outside? Please come in and rest.”

Unlike the attendants surrounding Yuder’s bed, Kishiar remained motionless beyond the first protective barrier, maintaining a curious distance from the bed, neither fully entering nor withdrawing.

“…No. I will stay here.”

“Do you have other matters to attend to soon? Even so, wouldn’t it be better to rest for a while?”

…

Kishiar did not answer. As a servant rose to fetch a new towel and warm water, approaching Kishiar's position, Kishiar suddenly shook his head.

"I apologize… but please leave through the opposite door, not this one."

"Eh?"

The servant, who had reflexively expressed his confusion, was taken aback upon looking at Kishiar.

"No, Your Grace. Since when have you been sweating so much? Good heavens. You have perspired as much as that guest over there!"

Up close, Kishiar's forehead and neck were completely drenched in sweat. It was unbelievable that he could maintain a smile and carry on a conversation without showing any sign of his abnormal state.

Kishiar, waving off the panic-stricken attendant, took a deep breath and smiled faintly.

"I'm alright. More importantly, that person's condition is urgent; I would prefer you tend to him. I would like to help personally, but alas, I cannot."

"What nonsense you speak, Your Grace. How could someone of your stature… Nevertheless, I will ensure you need not worry. However, please do not stay here any longer than necessary. You've hardly eaten throughout the party; I shall bring you some refreshments."

“No. Tomorrow holds the first trial of the House of Apeto. I doubt it will proceed as planned, but I must attend nonetheless; my stay cannot be prolonged.”

“Then all the more reason not to linger here, wouldn’t you agree?”

“Just a little longer. Until it gets better.”

“Your Grace…”

“Just a little more.”

Kishiar stubbornly dismissed the attendants, preventing them from fussing over him more than Yuder, whom he kept watch over without missing a beat, even amidst conversation. His gaze, gentle yet firm, never strayed from Yuder’s condition on the bed.

Eventually, the attendants ceased urging Kishiar to rest. He remained standing in the same spot before the protective barrier, watching over Yuder as he wished.

Kishiar observed every detail: Yuder’s pallid cheeks twisted in pain, faint moans slipping through clenched teeth, limbs convulsing, and eventually, his body slumping over as if succumbed to fever.

And Yuder, through his faint senses, was aware of Kishiar’s vigil.

The attendants, not being Awakeners, might not comprehend the enormity of what Kishiar was enduring, but he knew all too well.

Enduring the scent of a newly manifested second-gender Awakener in heat was not a matter of mere patience. Even at a distance, the overwhelming impulse was a challenge to withstand.

There was no urgency as there had been when he first rushed to move Yuder here, nor was there a compelling reason for him to stay

and watch.

Yet, why was he so stubbornly enduring this pain, this instinct?

As dawn approached without a decrease in fever, the attendants finally brought precious ice. But even after the ice had melted, Yuder did not regain consciousness, the fever so intense it seemed to emit a mirage of steam.

At the break of dawn, Kishiar spoke.

“We must use Ponesa. Do we have any in storage?”

“What? No, since Your Grace left the palace…”

“Then we must acquire some.”

“You can only obtain Ponesa powder with permission from the Imperial Physician and the Imperial Pharmacy. And at this hour, the pharmacy would not yet be open…”

“Do we need to go to a pharmacy that isn’t even open?”

The attendants exchanged glances, their expressions turning to one of disbelief. They were the ones who had witnessed the growth of the legendary mischievous prince who once lived in this palace, so they surmised what their master intended to do.

“Surely you do not intend to scale the walls of the palace greenhouse to fetch the Ponesa yourself, do you?”

“…”

“Your Grace!”

At that moment, Yuder began to breathe heavily once more. After the attendants had waged a war, sopping his face and limbs with

melted ice water and wiping them down, when they lifted their heads, Kishiar had already vanished from where he stood.

“Good heavens, my word Can it be true that he has really gone?”

“Isnt that the place the Empress herself tends to? I have seen with my own eyes the installation of protective magic there, stronger than anything before If by some mischance he is hurt by it, whatever shall we do?”

“What sort of person must he be to go to such lengths?”

Their gazes turned toward Yuder’s face. In their eyes, now more cautious and respectful than before, Yuder was merely closing his eyes in a daze

With that, Yuder’s consciousness slipped away once again.

Two manifestations. Two heats.

Both the beginning and the end were completely different, yet something was the same.

Somewhere deep within, deeper than the flesh, there was the fact that the same person existed alongside the strange desires that flared up like flames.

Once they had existed in despair, and at another time, they had been like a silent wall of protection at his side.

And now

“More.”

A familiar voice called out to him through the muddled consciousness.

“Yuder.”

Like smoke, Yuder’s floating consciousness was drawn to the call, rising towards somewhere. As he ascended, the sensations throughout his body became clearer, and the sounds from outside grew louder.

“Yuder!”

Yuder opened his eyes.

Beyond the hazy view, he saw Kishiar supporting his body. They were standing in mid-air, over an abyss with nothing below. Around Yuder, a gentle light radiated, enveloping him protectively.

””

“The blessing has done its job well.”

Kishiar muttered to the blinking Yuder.

“If you had rolled a bit more, you would have fallen completely off the cliff.”

The light surrounding Yuder slowly receded as if confirming his safety. Yuder stared blankly at Kishiar’s face, sweating as in a faint memory. Wondering what it meant, Kishiar took a deep breath and spoke.

“I apologize for being late. I thought I was close, but it seems I underestimated my assistants ability to hide”

””

“Nathan has gone to fetch the luggage; just wait a little. I have brought the common sedatives and stabilizers, so if you take those”

Kishiar had the rare experience of not being able to finish his sentence. This was because Yuder silently reached out and wrapped his arms around Kishiar’s neck.

A scent, potent enough to make one dizzy, enveloped Kishiar simultaneously. It was a hot, alluring fragrance that, despite its intensity, did not lose the honesty akin to its master.

Kishiar, fighting the urge to embrace him right then, kept silent for a moment before speaking again.

“It must be very difficult to endure, but if you just bear with it a little longer”

“Its not I who is enduring, is it?”

A low, submerged voice tapped at his ears. Within their locked gazes, darkened eyes whispered.

“In front of me, you promised not to hold back any longer, did you not?”

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Chapter 615

Nathan Zuckerman swiftly dismounted his steed, shouldered his pack, and ascended the rugged mountain path as if carried by the wind. The conversation he had earlier with his liege lord played over in his mind.

“I’ve dealt with all those who entered my assigned territory. Is Sir Aile still around?”

“It seems so. I found traces left by him first; he must be nearby.”

Zuckerman’s rendezvous with Kishiar was later than anticipated. Subduing the mercenaries was not challenging, but finding his stealthy liege, who moved without a trace, took time.

He found his liege quietly observing mercenaries who were like mushrooms sprouting from the earth, only their faces visible. These were the marks of the remaining companion, Yuder Aile, as Kishiar had mentioned.

“Buried quite well, arent they? It doesn’t seem like his first attempt at this.”

It was a surprising exclamation to make upon seeing the buried men, but Zuckerman found himself in agreement with his liege.

The signs of battle around the men Yuder had left behind were plentiful. They looked less like the aftermath of Awakeners clashing and more akin to a street brawls chaotic traces, suggesting the mercenaries had employed every means in a desperate resistance.

However, the absence of Yuder’s own signs among the many meant all their efforts had been futile. Yuder Aile had thoroughly

outplayed the two awakened mercenaries and buried them here alone.

He wasn’t one to waste time without reason; likely, he had done this to extract information.

“Quickly fulfilling the mission while perfectly hiding his traces, and not forgetting to complete the part I assigned. Even though he started later than us because he dealt with those who used tracking abilities first.”

“It will certainly be difficult to identify who did this based on these traces alone.”

“That it will.”

Kishiar, having finished observing, lifted his head. He surveyed the surroundings, gauging the direction, and then strolled leisurely towards a particular spot.

“So… How did it go on your end, Nathan?”

Zuckerman succinctly reported the information he had gathered from the mercenaries. Upon hearing that their backer was Baron Renbow and that a sage had contacted them from that quarter yesterday, Kishiar lightly replied that he had uncovered as much.

“Nothing too surprising, then. And, dealing with the Awakeners wasn’t too difficult?”

“Yes.”

The mercenaries Zuckerman had faced were troublesome Awakeners with significant abilities. There was one who could move short distances instantly and another who could manipulate the wind to create diversions, ideal for escape in the mountains.

Therefore, Zuckerman had lured them into a trap using a herbalist's rest cabin he had stumbled upon. By skillfully pretending to leave Yuder's traces, he had turned the mercenaries into his prey. In the confined space of the cabin, no one could withstand Nathan.

"The information provided by Sir Aile beforehand was quite helpful. The cabin had plenty of useful tools, so it wasn't difficult."

Before the mercenaries converged, Yuder had provided Nathan with several strategies to counter typical types of Awakeners he would face, as if he already knew Zuckerman's combat style. The advice was precise.

Even if Nathan Zuckerman had not known the method, it would not have significantly hindered him in dealing with the matter at hand, but having this knowledge made the task several times easier.

It was a startling realization, but Yuder Aile seemed to eerily know everything.

The Nathan Zuckerman of old might have strived to uncover the true identity of Yuder Aile upon such a realization. However, the man he was now harbored no such inclination. He could hardly deny that the recent events had influenced this change in attitude.

"You seem to have grown quite close," remarked Kishiar, suddenly sporting a peculiar smile.

"…May I ask whom you're referring to?" Nathan inquired.

"You and my assistant," Kishiar replied, seemingly in jest. Yet, it was known that Kishiar often embedded unfathomable implications within such remarks. Having witnessed his liege exhibiting unusual behavior towards Yuder Aile on several occasions, Nathan decided not to dismiss this question lightly.

"We are not close," he stated flatly.

“Really?” Kishiar prodded.

“As I mentioned before, it was Sir Aile who sought advice first, and I merely contributed a little. Just because we discussed strategies to counter the enemy doesn’t necessarily imply closeness, in my view.”

Nathan was referring to a time when Yuder Aile was absent, and Kishiar, who had just woken up from his sleep, had summoned him to recount recent events. The sharp-witted man easily surmised that his loyal adjutant had been collaborating with his assistant to gauge his unusual condition.

“Hmm. Even if many are clamoring for my attention, you barely acknowledge them. Yet, you share tea and snacks with my assistant, even going so far as to secretly watch over me, and you claim you’re not close… Nathan, I’m beginning to think your standards of friendship might be a tad different from the common notion. What do you think?”

Caught off-guard by the question, Nathan Zuckerman drew upon years of experience to navigate his lord’s unexpected inquiries.

“If there is a particular answer you wish to hear from me, please, just say so.”

“So, you won’t be led on that easily anymore,” Kishiar remarked, a playful smirk on his lips as he tousled Nathan’s hair. Even as Nathan grew to be as tall as a mighty fir tree, his lord would occasionally treat him as if he were still a small, young page.

“Nathan. You used to insist that we must remain vigilant around Yuder. I’m curious if you still hold that belief.”

Kishiar’s question unexpectedly touched on a matter that had been weighing heavily on Nathan’s mind.

After a moment of silent contemplation, he responded, “I still believe we need to maintain our guard. However, aside from that, I’ve come to the conclusion that there is no one as trustworthy as Sir Aile in certain matters. My heeding his advice and sharing opinions with him is purely professional, not a matter of personal affinity.”

“On what matters do you base such a judgment?”

“It concerns the Duke, Your Grace.”

Kishiar’s eyes narrowed slightly.

“That means you were wary, but now you’ve changed your mind.”

Silence fell.

“Then, what if I command you not to trust Yuder Aile from this moment on, and conversely, Yuder suggests that I have become strange and proposes that you two investigate together? What would you do then?”

Nathan Zuckermand’s expression shifted. The southern knight, who had initially cast his gaze downward as if to discern his lord’s intent, eventually looked up, seemingly having reached a decision.

“To speak frankly… due to this incident, I’ve come to the decision that, at least once in matters concerning Your Grace, it would be alright to trust in Sir Aile’s word. I will verify the basis of both claims before making my judgment,” Nathan Zuckerman confessed. It was a statement he had previously made to Yuder as well. However, coming from a knight famously known for unconditionally following Kishiar’s commands, it was a surprisingly remarkable admission. Kishiar burst into laughter as if he had heard the answer he was hoping for.

“Nathan. The day has finally come when even you, who has never changed, have begun to change.”

Silence followed.

“I had always hoped that you would be someone who could always give such an answer. But until now, you never had. Isn’t that so?”

Indeed it was so. For Nathan Zuckerman, Kishiar had been an absolute being.

Of course, that fact had not changed even now. It was just that he had come to recognize the existence of someone else who regarded Kishiar with the same blind absoluteness as himself.

Because he simply could not deny the significance of that individual.

The laughter slowly subsided. Walking ahead of Nathan, Kishiar finally spoke in a softer tone, almost as if talking to himself.

“You must be curious about why I asked you about change.”

Silence again.

“The old me lived a life where change meant death, but not anymore. Look at me now. Do you think I have changed much?”

“You have not changed much. Since… since you created the Cavalry.”

“More precisely, ‘since meeting Yuder Aile.’ Aside from that, I don’t think I’ve changed much. Neither my disposition nor my essence has changed significantly since my time in Peletta.”

The man’s gaze settled quietly as he critically assessed himself.

“On reflection, it seems I still find it hard to escape the belief that patience and steadfastness hold more value than change. Despite declaring my desire to break free from a life where I am expected by

no one, I didn’t really know how to change. Knowing that change in what I do doesn’t necessarily mean a change in essence.”

Kishiar didn’t say to whom he had made such a statement. Only his gaze, which softened and then firmed again, hinted at the identity of the one to whom such words might have been spoken.

“But to me, who has struggled with this… he said not to hold on any longer.”

Silence.

“Don’t suppress yourself. It’s okay to act honestly.”

Again, who had said this was omitted. But Nathan Zuckerman could guess what the omitted subject might be.

“I thought I could do anything if it was the answer he taught me… But even at this age, I’ve only just realized that being honest feels like standing naked before the world.”

It was indeed a very difficult thing. Saying this, Kishiar suddenly smiled bitterly, then fondly, as if recalling something dear.

“There are those who manage such difficult tasks as easily as breathing. Perhaps it’s time I changed too.”

Silence.

“Nathan. I want to change.”

The voice was so soft it was almost inaudible. Yet to Nathan Zuckerman, those words rang louder than thunder.

“And you, I hope you will continue to change as well.”

Kishiar did not specify how exactly he wished Nathan Zuckerman to change. Nathan realized that he would probably spend a very long

time pondering the meaning of his lord’s words.

Just then, as if sensing something, Kishiar abruptly turned his head elsewhere, which perhaps deprived Nathan of more time to reflect.

“…Yuder?”

“Yes?” Nathan responded.

“I sense a scent. Something is…”

Muttering unintelligibly, Kishiar’s expression suddenly hardened with a terrifying intensity. A man whose eyes changed color like flames leaping into a fervent red, he launched himself toward the darkness that had descended upon the forest. Nathan, too, sprinted after him. The two men, undeterred by the cracking of branches under their feet, hurtled down the narrow path with astonishing speed.

“I thought it was closer…”

Kishiar, who seemed to see something in the darkness, moved his hands as if reaching out and continued to speak in an undertone, the words faintly reaching Nathan. During the pursuit, Nathan Zuckerman caught sight of a few men embedded in the ground.

It was when they headed towards a rugged hill, not far from there, that a pungent smell of blood, mixed with a strange scent that Nathan Zuckerman had never encountered before, hit his nostrils.

Kishiar’s shoulders tensed up in an instant. He, too, had undoubtedly detected the peculiar scents. A profound silence fell upon Kishiar, and even Nathan, who had long served him, could sense an unfamiliar emotion crossing the man’s face.

Moments later, a ghastly scene unfolded before their eyes.

A stranger lay collapsed with a sword impaled in his back, surrounded by a pool of blood.

The peculiar scent wafted most strongly around this area.

Just by the sight of the hilt of the sword in the man's back, Nathan Zuckerman knew to whom it belonged.

"Your Grace!"

Nathan's cry was swift, but Kishiar moved faster towards the scene. Ignoring the impaled man, Kishiar peered intently down the shadow-enshrouded slope below.

Silence.

Then, from the depths of the dark shadows, a command was issued.

"Nathan. Bury the one here in a place easy for retrieval. Then return and search the horse for the packs. There is a medicine I had instructed to be packed in my gear. Bring those… and if you find my condition to be poor, take that medicine and go to the cabin you mentioned earlier with Yuder Aile, and make sure to administer it."

With those final words, Kishiar fearlessly dove down the slope.

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Chapter 616

Nathan Zuckerman did not take long to reach his intended destination, burdened as he was with a parcel of medicine. The earnest exertion of a swordmaster's body was indeed swift and powerful, incomparable to that of an ordinary person.

Upon arrival at the site still reeking of a peculiar scent mixed with the scent of blood, he surveyed the surroundings. A faint sound of labored breathing came from behind the spot where Yuder's sword lay discarded, the very sword that had been plunged into the mercenary Nathan had buried.

This was the place Kishiar had leaped into without hesitation, a site whose scent could be detected even by one who was not an Awakener like Nathan Zuckerman. The southern knight quietly approached, clutching the parcel and making no effort to conceal the sound of his footsteps.

Despite the short distance, each step sharpened the tension, pricking at his nerves. With one hand ready on his sword sheath to strike should an enemy appear, he stood at the brink of the hill, gazing downward.

As tension peaked, every muscle in his body trembled subtly.

It was then that he heard it.

"You've come at quite the opportune time, Nathan."

A voice, weary and suppressed as though holding something back, emanated from the darkness below.

Recognizing the voice of his liege, Nathan swiftly removed his hand from his sword sheath.

“Where are you, Your Grace?”

“Here.”

The voice came from just beneath his feet, from a space tangled amongst the trees. Nathan hurriedly retrieved a magic orb from his parcel that could emit light and cautiously descended toward the voice. Like a hollowed-out space beneath an eroded cliff, there was a cunningly crafted hollow there.

Revealed in the faint light, Kishiar sat leaning against something, holding Yuder Aile.

The man’s breath was heavy and his expression was chillingly impassive. Although he was not as disoriented as the second-gender Awakener they had encountered in Tainu, it was clear he was struggling to suppress something.

“It would be best not to come any closer. Yuder is… not quite himself.”

At the end of his words, the black-haired man, panting like a wounded beast, lifted his savage eyes as if recognizing a new intruder. His dark, fevered eyes seemed not to recognize Nathan, glaring fiercely. The scent was so overpowering that standing before him was like standing beneath a ripe fruit tree, heady and disorienting.

Seeing the intense aversion in the man’s eyes, Nathan realized that it was not safe to approach carelessly.

He bent slowly, careful not to aggravate either of them, and spoke.

“Should I take Sir Aile as you commanded, or would you prefer to administer the medicine here?”

It was a question to gauge Kishiar's condition, to see if he would follow the command or not.

After a moment of silence, Kishiar let out a faint laugh.

"It would be better to administer it first. Bring it here."

As Nathan reached for the medicine, it slipped from his grasp as if pulled by an invisible thread and fell straight to Kishiar.

Kishiar unwrapped the medicine while calling to the one in his arms.

"Yuder."

Yuder Aile's gaze shifted, his breaths sharp and more alert than usual, as he murmured something inaudible.

Time and again, he had endured, and now, he would do so once more.

The growling, almost submerged in a half-sleep, carried a heat that spoke of barely contained ferocity. Kishiar, unfazed by the clear signs of his companion's distressed state, gently froze him in place.

"Yes, I understand. I'll do as you wish, but first, try this. We must at least attempt, mustn't we? That is simply who I am."

Silence.

"Try this, and if it doesn't work, then I will truly follow your lead… Okay?"

Seizing the brief moment of Yuder's hesitation, Kishiar pressed the medicine to his lips as if pouring it in. Soon after, without a hint of reluctance, Yuder nodded, his grumbles swallowed up by the act. Nathan Zuckerman, instead of observing his lord's most intimate moments, cast his gaze down deeply.

“Umm… uh… hmpf…”

It was unclear whether the pale hand that flailed was resisting the medicine or responding to a kiss. Kishiar took that hand in his own and repeated the process over and over, swallowing every breath that escaped.

The sight of a Duke of imperial lineage personally administering medicine to an adult man was unimaginable to anyone not present.

After a while, Kishiar finally exhaled deeply, the moisture on his lips glistening in the light, lending an otherworldly aura to the scene.

“Are you alright?”

“One can only hope to be.”

The response to the concern for his well-being was ambiguous, yet the man chuckled suddenly.

“Until just before you found me, I thought my heart would stop… The blessing from the West did have its effect. When we return, I must bring that Awakener to the capital, no matter what.”

Silence.

“But tell me… can you guess what one who has shaken many a heart said the moment he regained consciousness?”

Kishiar didn’t wait for an answer, as if to shake off something restraining him, he continued.

“He scolded me, told me not to hold on. If I hadn’t remembered you were coming… it would have been truly dangerous.”

His words carried a tone of disbelief, but Kishiar’s gaze was infinitely tender, a stark contrast to the tension that seemed ready to burst.

“What are your plans now?”

“We shall wait and see if the medicine takes effect before deciding. However… thinking back to the time of the manifestation, I wonder.”

Kishiar had never spoken in detail to Nathan Zuckerman about the time Yuder Aile had experienced his second gender manifestation. He had only explained that due to poor health, Yuder had been isolated from the ball and stayed in a small palace until the aftereffects had subsided.

Yet, from Kishiar’s words, it appeared that Yuder Aile had faced a similar struggle back then, where the medicine had not been effective.

Nathan Zuckerman ruefully recalled the mage’s medicine Yuder Aile had likely passed on to someone else. Had it been available now, perhaps they wouldn’t be in such a predicament.

However, he suspected that even if the man had the chance to go back, he would have given the medicine to someone more in need. It seemed Kishiar might share this thought, as the corners of his lips lifted in a cool smile.

“If it proves ineffective… then, Nathan. I will amend the command I have for you.”

“What is it?”

A sigh. The breath of his lord, carrying a warmth akin to Yuder’s, filled the space. The keen feeling of being in front of a wild beast shaking the shackles that would soon be released penetrated Nathan Zuckerman’s whole body.

“I will carry Yuder, so you just guide us to the cabin, but… never look back. Once we arrive, leave the luggage…”

His voice, which had been on the verge of breaking, paused momentarily. Then, with a breath filled with uncontainable ferocity and depth, the final words continued.

“Sort out the surroundings and then head to the destination first. I will follow later.”

Nathan Zuckerman understood the command’s implications in silence.

It was a foregone conclusion that Yuder Aile’s heat period was imminent before they departed. Kishiar had planned accordingly, intending to separate from Yuder as soon as he entered heat period, to ensure his rest.

However, Yuder’s heat period erupted at the most unexpected moment, and Kishiar deviated from his plan. For the first time, he decided to entrust his back to a subordinate and embrace the unforeseen events that had unfolded.

Alone, without anyone’s help or protection.

To respond only to the will of the one in his embrace and to dedicate time solely for him, no matter what happened.

An adjutant leaving his lord behind was an unthinkable act.

Their intended destination was a small mountain village to gather information about the Crown Prince. It was a difficult task to enter the village unnoticed with Yuder Aile, who had just entered heat period.

Excluding the fact that Nathan Zuckerman could not personally verify the safety of Kishiar and Yuder with his own eyes, this might have been the better option.

Yet, Nathan Zuckerman recalled his lord’s voice muttering, ‘I want to change.’ The words ‘I hope you change too’ also echoed in his

mind.

Nathan Zuckerman remained silent for a long time.

After a while, the loyal knight bowed formally, as he always did.

“I will do as you command.”

Kishiar’s prediction soon became a reality. Yuder Aile, momentarily quieted by a sedative, regained consciousness within minutes and began to growl again. Kishiar groaned in agony as his breath, hotter than before, intensified.

Yet, a faint smile spread across his face.

“So the conclusion is reached.”

Nathan Zuckerman saw his lord for the first time giving up on endurance and doing what he desired.

Kishiar, cradling the languid Yuder, stood up. Nathan Zuckerman moved to support him as he shook his head as if dizzy, but Kishiar declined the help with a glance.

Nathan Zuckerman, a non-Awakener, could not fathom the immense pain and endurance Kishiar was maintaining while he managed to climb up the hill without letting Yuder out of his embrace.

“Lead the way.”

Nathan Zuckerman moved swiftly ahead without hesitation. He felt the presence and murmurs of his lord carrying Yuder behind him but kept his promise not to look back.

He set down the luggage in front of the small cabin and passed through to enter the woods. Moments later, the faint sound of a door opening and closing was heard.

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Chapter 617

For ten years, Yuder had occupied the position of Commander.

This meant that for a decade, he had lived buried among the world's most numerous Awakeners. Although an incomplete Omega Awakener who neither experienced heat nor emitted a scent, Yuder was familiar with the stories of numerous second gender Awakeners who underwent ordinary heats, stories unknown to him.

It wasn't necessary to spend the entire heat period asleep. Those who had grown accustomed to spending their heat with other second gender Awakeners instead of sleeping with the aid of sedatives could not understand those who chose to endure their heat in solitude. They extolled the virtues of faithfully following their instincts to enjoy pleasant moments, claiming that the exhaustion would vanish, leaving a refreshing sensation.

Yuder, however, could not comprehend the 'pleasant moments' they referred to. He failed to see what was refreshing or enjoyable about losing control of oneself.

For him, being a second gender Awakener was a source of agony. The single heat experience that had come and gone with his manifestation was a source of shame, and the powerless time when he could not control himself was a horror he did not even wish to imagine in dreams.

Therefore, he had never considered his scentlessness, lack of response to others' scents, and absence of heat period as a misfortune. Quite the contrary.

"Uh… Hmm."

But now, leaning against a door, deeply kissing the man who embraced him, Yuder felt differently about the words he had heard before.

His mind and body, governed by instinct, had become extremely simple. The experience wasn't as bad as he had vaguely imagined. The myriad thoughts that usually weighed heavily on his mind vanished, and his body, buried in heat, felt neither discomfort from his dormant abilities nor his heightened senses.

Despite feeling utterly powerless, he was surprisingly unafraid, for he was in contact with the one he most desired to devour.

Kishiar La Orr. As long as he was with him, Yuder was absolutely safe.

Though no one had taught him, he knew that only this man could bring rain to quench the fire within him. His instincts loudly proclaimed that Kishiar, too, was suppressing a sea of desires within him, desiring Yuder in kind.

So what was the problem? Was there any reason not to desire Kishiar?

No. There wasn't. He didn't want to hold back anymore.

It was time to show the man, who still didn't fully understand what it meant not to hold back, exactly what it entailed.

His thoughts were simple, but his goal was clear. Yuder murmured to him to keep his promise, insisting he not suppress himself in his presence and demanding to see everything. The man who had been prolonging the moment, neither fully rejecting nor accepting Yuder, finally conceded after administering a bitter medicine.

He supported Yuder, clinging to him, whispering the same words into his ear all the way here with a voice full of deep heat.

“It’s okay. We’ll arrive soon. No matter what happens, I won’t let you go. If it’s too hard, you can bite me…”

Each time those words penetrated his ears, chills spread from the inside of his ears throughout his body, and he trembled from within. When Yuder bit his neck like a permitted beast, he felt a patting hand on his back accompanied by a low moan. The scent that emanated from him confirmed that the moan was not one of pain.

Soft lips gently grazed Yuder’s ear, cheek, and then his own lips, descending with a tremble that held a promise of more.

Yuder, without a word, could feel that this trembling was born of anticipation, just before a moment where restraint was no longer necessary.

And then, at the very moment the door opened and he entered,

“Sigh…”

Thud. The man who had been obediently offering his neck to Yuder suddenly shifted direction. As the door closed, Yuder’s back was pressed against the hard door. Their lips locked in a breathless embrace. Yuder eagerly welcomed this, feeling as if water had finally been brought to his parched lips.

It was good. Truly good. He could feel his entire body rejoicing in ecstasy. The sensation of being tightly embraced, with not an inch of space between them, was unbelievably delightful.

As their tongues intertwined, a surge of acute sensations, incomparable to any before, shivered through them, and suddenly, Yuder’s vision blurred. He realized that his body, tense to the point of

pain since the moment he reunited with Kishiar, had finally reached its limit.

Without a chance to stop, everything began.

“Mmm…”

Yuder, tongues still entwined, opened his eyes hazily and shivered. The sensation of warmth spreading between his legs was dizzyingly pleasant.

“Ha… Ah…”

As he released the breath he had been holding during the height of pleasure, he felt his strength drain from his body, yet his hunger remained. It was only natural, as he had not yet obtained what he truly desired.

Before, his sensations had been scattered, but now, in the midst of this burning heat, they converged blindly toward one focal point. His desire for the figure before him was insatiable. Yuder, gasping for breath through slightly parted lips, reached out.

Still not enough. Faster. Hurry. In his eagerness, he roughly pushed aside the fabric of their clothes, and Kishiar supported Yuder’s hips, rubbing his face against them.

“…At least, I wanted to give you a better place to rest…”

The old cabin, barely showing signs of human presence, was neater than one would expect for a rest stop occasionally used by herb gatherers. It contained only a makeshift bed, a small stove, and a pile of miscellaneous items like a storeroom.

Kishiar seemed to regret the simplicity, but Yuder did not mind at all.

What does it matter if it’s a luxurious palace or a cramped cabin? Being together was enough.

Stop these needless thoughts. You only need to see me.

Yuder pressed his body forward to convey his desire. The intense scent emanating from him completely ensnared Kishiar. Their breaths mingled with heat, and they were soon intertwined again. Kishiar, too, focused solely on fulfilling Yuder’s desires, saying nothing more.

The kiss that began near the door continued until they found themselves on the only space available to lie down, a straw bed. Their clothes had almost completely disappeared. There was no fire in the stove, yet they were not cold in the slightest.

The heat of their bodies, biting and licking each other, was so intense that it felt like flames rising within might consume them, leaving no room for the winter’s chill to penetrate.

Kishiar, holding Yuder, extended his tongue boldly, licking and nibbling at his chest. Yuder’s nipples, having been sucked on by his man several times before, remembered the pleasure that could be derived from there.

“Mmm, uh, ah…”

One side was powerfully sucked in, while sharp sensations rose within the lips; on the other side, the body shivered under the twisting sensation between long fingers. The sensation of being pressed and rubbed was surely close to pain, yet the more it tingled, the deeper the heat pooled in the belly became. It was a curious thing, but Yuder had long realized that such occurrences were possible under the hands of Kishiar.

Yuder grasped the two stiffly erect members pressed against each other between their bellies. Though it was impossible to hold

both in one hand, Yuder shook them greedily. Each rub of their sensitive tips caused a burst of light before his eyes and irresistible sounds to flow from his lips.

“Ah, hmm… uh…”

Kishiar swallowed all these sounds, as if it were a waste to let them escape.

Often, an erect member is called ferocious, but anyone who saw the one in Yuder’s grasp, Kishiar’s, might have felt differently. Yuder found it beautiful, pulsing hotly in his fingers, unabashed in its displayed desire, so mesmerizing that no other words came to mind.

As his heart swelled with this feeling, Yuder could no longer be satisfied with just shaking them together. Gasping for breath, he spread his legs. Between them, already soaked from sustained heat, his own arousal was undeniable.

Deep in his belly, he yearned for something to penetrate that aching hunger.

He wanted it inside.

Then, he should just do it.

Yuder, feeling sweat trickle down his forehead, tightly gripped Kishiar’s member. Just as he tried to recklessly pull it between his spread legs, a large hand stopped him. His body, quivering with anticipation, stiffened.

“Ah, hmm, why…”

“Not like this… without preparation. It’ll hurt.”

Even amidst heavy breathing, the firm voice sent a thrill down Yuder’s spine. As Yuder looked up resentfully, Kishiar raised his

torso. In the darkness, his perfect naked form shone clearly. In that moment of distraction, the man deliberately and sensually moistened his fingers in his mouth.

Yuder couldn’t tear his gaze away from the sight, so blatantly arousing and honest. Kishiar’s eyes, too, never left Yuder, openly spread beneath him, drenched in pleasure.

Finally, with a soft sound, Kishiar’s fingers emerged from his lips, sufficiently lubricated. Yuder, heart racing with anticipation, spread his hand. Soon, the fingers plunged deeply between his spread legs.

“Hmm!”

Kishiar’s fingers were much larger and longer than others. At first, even one finger felt like too much pressure, as if it would penetrate to the very depths of his belly.

But now, it was different. The suddenly yielding membrane swallowed two fingers at once, gripping them tightly as if it would never let go. A chilling pleasure surged, making his back arch.

Ah, that immense sensation of finally being filled in his starving place.

A thrill akin to goosebumps surged, and his body, already aflame, was drenched in ecstasy.

“Ah…!”

In the fantasy realm, Yuder, lost in the sensations overwhelming him, arched his body, unable to hear the groans escaping his lips.

Before he could fully regain his senses, a second surge of intense heat welled up at the tip of his heated member, and a white substance burst forth in disarray. Trembling with a desire that did not subside even after his second climax, Yuder embraced Kisiar.

The body he held was indistinguishably hot from his own. He thought he heard a man, who had passionately kissed his ear and thrust his tongue in a frenzy, whispering breathlessly, asking if he was alright, but he couldn't be sure.

Their entwined fingers explored each other, and each time they parted the sticky insides, his mind seemed to whiten. Initially accommodating two fingers, later more invaded, completely filling him. With each squelching sound, his body tensed, and sparks flew.

Yet, his body and instincts knew something was still missing.

"Ah… Uh, uh…"

Unable to form coherent words, Yuder expressed himself through his body instead. Pushing away Kisiar's hand and catching his breath, he grasped his own damp thighs, feeling his gaze drawn there.

Gasping for air, he exerted strength to part them, and soon felt the sensation of the opening giving way, briefly revealing a gap.

In the darkness, their gazes met for an instant.

Yuder greedily watched the last vestige of restraint vanish from Kisiar's eyes.

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Chapter 618

Two large, elongated hands overlapped upon Yuder’s own, which clutched at his thighs. The sensation of skin sliding over his fingers and the back of his hand made him momentarily catch his breath. At that moment,

“Ah… Hah…!”

His lower body pushed upwards, as the swollen organ forcefully penetrated the parted crevice.

In that instant, it seemed as if all his senses were solely devoted to this connection. Though his eyes could see, his mind couldn’t register, and the sounds reaching his ears held no meaning. The pressure on his chest from the lifted posture and the urgent need for breath, his thoughts, even his own identity, were all forgotten.

Yuder wholly felt the tightness as the opening stretched to its limit, welcoming what he had long awaited. The tingling sensation as it made way deeper and deeper, shivering with excitement.

Time seemed to slow. The girth and shape of the organ inside him, every pulsating vein, and throbbing heartbeat were perceived with excruciating clarity.

Finally, when it felt like it was tapping against the very end of his insides, Yuder heard his own loud moan, distant as the ejaculate forcefully shot through his torso and chest.

“Aah…!”

The end of the wall within.

In this life, when Kishiar first overlapped with him, he never crossed that wall. It wasn't that he couldn't but rather he knew Yuder's limits better than Yuder himself did. Though he could have pushed further, he always stopped just before, sensing exactly where the end lay.

However, there was no need to push further deliberately. As their bodies merged more over time, Yuder's tolerance surprisingly increased.

And now.

Without any pain, the depths within opened wide, welcoming the organ pressing deeply against the wall's end.

"Uuh, ha, aah…"

Breathing was hard with the fullness inside, almost as if his belly had swollen up to his navel. With each short breath, the sensation of the organ pressing against the end of his wall briefly clouded his mind, but Yuder relished this feeling, having finally obtained what he desired.

Gasping like a beast that had overeaten, Yuder clenched his teeth and reached down to the joined area. That slight movement caused a deep tightening within.

His fingers, smeared in various fluids, caught the still not fully entered shaft and the soft ends of pubic hair.

Indeed.

His suspicion turned to certainty. Even though it had reached the wall's end, there was still more. Confirming this, Yuder felt a surge of thrill and joy inside his swollen belly.

Then, at last, a long breath escaped Kishiar. The shockingly deep and rapid penetration they both felt seemed like a very long time to savor. It wasn't only Yuder who felt this way. Kishiar, removing Yuder's hand exploring the joined area, intertwined their fingers and drew them towards his lips.

The rough fingertips, now exposed as their gloves were removed, received a brief kiss.

Simultaneously, their bodies began to tremble.

"Ah, ah… Ah!"

It was a movement more rugged than ever before. There was no time to synchronize and move together to the rhythm, such was the intensity. Yet, there was no sense of rejection. The sensations, which would usually feel too intense, were now surprisingly pleasant. If possible, he wanted the man entwined with him to be even more consumed by deep desires, to be moved by the same emotions, urging him on even more.

Thus, Yuder allowed the sounds erupting from his mouth to burst forth unrestrained. He made no attempt to hold back or suppress any of it.

Like a horse running freely on a path without any fences, their bodies intertwined and swayed. He shivered at the sensation of being filled and emptied ceaselessly.

"Uhhh…"

This was what he had desired.

This was the very sensation he had vaguely longed for.

In a parched thirst that knew no quenching, the flames that had only been rising were now being sated by a torrential downpour,

greeted with jubilation. Though it felt like little movement had been made, another intense climax surged up to the crown of his head. Yuder, feeling strength gather in their abdomen, tightened his legs around the man's waist. Even if he couldn't move in rhythm, this alone made the penetration much deeper, the thick tip pushing further into the walls than before.

"Ah…"

Yuder shuddered, shaking his head. Droplets of sweat splashed, dampening his hair. Even the sensation of teeth sinking into his exposed neck felt like an intense pleasure.

When his inside was finally pushed to its limit, Yuder felt his vision blur and the area between his legs grow wet. The ejaculate that spurted from the trembling member, though thinner than before, was just as forceful.

However, this climax was not just at the front. As semen fell in front, the massive member that was tightly held in the back was also twisting and tightening, bringing a searing heat inside. This was the explosion of internal mucus that occurs when an Omega Awakener reaches the pinnacle of climax. The clear mucus that burst forth as he climaxed spurted and flowed between the joined parts, soaking his buttocks.

"Ah, ah… Ahh…"

It was an indescribable pleasure.

His vision alternated between darkness and light.

Yuder, feeling the hot sensation thrusting deep within and withdrawing, thought blankly.

'More, more… More…'

In response to his desire, Kishiar did not cease his movements even as Yuder shivered in climax. Moving as if Yuder’s desires were his own, the man embraced Yuder deeply.

His lips ceaselessly stole kisses from Yuder’s cheeks, eyes, nose, and lips. Though his movements lacked Yuder’s leisure, there was a desperate, almost poignant feeling, as if not having a part of the other’s body in his mouth meant death.

Yuder responded to these kisses as best as he could, embracing Kishiar’s back. That was all he could do now. Their sweat-soaked fingertips, feeling the internal thrusting movements, twitched and flexed as if struck by lightning, sometimes slipping and scratching down the back in an inability to withstand the pleasure. But Kishiar never loosened his embrace around Yuder.

Yuder felt the sensation of swelling inside, as the moving member within him grew increasingly engorged. The inside of his belly, filled more tightly than ever, felt as though it might burst, yet the pleasure was so intense it was as if his mind was melting. Without a moment to adjust to the rhythm, his body twitched, his hips gyrated, and as he clenched his legs wrapped around the man, the latter’s lips forcefully sucked in Yuder’s lower lip.

As he reflexively parted his lips, the approaching tongue invaded Yuder’s mouth deeper than ever before.

Simultaneously, with a dizzying surge of pleasure causing his hips to buck upwards, Kishiar’s waist, which had retreated, now thrust forward with the most powerful force he had exerted thus far.

!

The thick tip finally pierced through the wall of his belly, unleashing a ferocious pleasure.

Amidst a storm of sensations so intense it felt as if it might pierce his heart, his insides were soaked with a heat not his own. Yuder trembled as if impaled, unable to make a sound.

At that moment, his gaze was stolen by the face of the man in the darkness, wrinkling his brow in the height of pleasure.

The face of Kishiar La Orr, accustomed to suppressing even his pleasure to avoid being excessively rough, was not present here.

Yuder observed, through the sweat-drenched golden hair in the night's darkness, the man's eyes honestly crumbling in the moment of climax. He saw the rough breath and emotion that instinctively revealed itself, then seemed to hide away, only to be fully released when their eyes met.

It was a face Kishiar had never shown Yuder in all their previous encounters.

"Ah"

It seemed as if his instincts made a quiet swallowing sound in his darkened mind.

How could any physical pleasure compare to the feeling of a parched earth finally drinking water?

""

When Yuder exhaled a long breath within the immense satisfaction, the man beneath him opened his eyes again. The man, looking down at Yuder laughing in satisfaction, pierced below him, similarly lifted the corners of his lips in a fierce smile.

In that moment, all the elegance that usually seeped through, and all the masks hidden beneath his smile, vanished from his face.

The man pulled Yuder’s relaxed legs onto his shoulders. Even after climaxing, his member, undiminished in vigor, began to thrust vigorously into Yuder’s belly once again. Yuder embraced the man’s neck, welcoming the movement.

The second time was even more intense than the first. The member, having once breached the wall, now repeatedly crossed its boundary with unabated ferocity. With each thrust came immense shock and strength flooded his body, but so too did immense pleasure. Each time Yuder’s legs, slick with sweat, almost slid off the shoulder, Kishiar repeatedly grasped them, restoring them to their original position.

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Chapter 619

For the first time since his birth, Yuder was completely immersed in pure pleasure, free from any turmoil. The anxiety of needing to maintain rationality had vanished at some point. He moved as he wished, expressing his feelings honestly.

His mind, devoid of any plans or thoughts, surprisingly felt more natural as time passed. He became acutely aware of his body, its limits, and capabilities more clearly and cleanly than ever before.

His mind, cleared of complicated knowledge and cluttered memories, was akin to muddy water settling into clarity. Through the serene ripples, he could clearly see the existence of his partner, merging with him, overwhelming in its certainty.

Indeed, instinct was not an enemy that made him lose control. It was quite the opposite.

He had never thought of jewels as beautiful, but the emotion he felt looking into those red eyes, glowing like flames in the darkness, was undeniably the eternal longing inherent in human emotion.

And that same emotion was present in those beautiful eyes.

Some things become more evident when they are not articulated in words.

In this silent moment, entwined without a word exchanged, Yuder rejoiced in the realization that he possessed the body to become one with Kishiar La Orr.

He hoped the immense sense of unity he felt at the moment would be eternally etched within him, even though time was finite and could not last forever.

“Ah…!”

Once again, the tip of the glans, surging over the wall and plunging in, unerringly struck an indescribable point of pleasure. Sensations he never thought existed in his body simultaneously shivered and glowed, gripping his insides with intense force.

Yuder trembled faintly, his eyelids fluttering as he felt the sensation of ecstasy sweeping over his body. His organ, having climaxed several times, could hardly expel any more fluid, yet the feeling of climax remained the same. Waves of pleasure, starting from deep within his hips and belly, enveloped his body for a long time, sweeping over him like ocean waves.

He did not resist the fierce wave that seemed to sweep away his entire being. No matter how high the waves threatened to engulf him, it was alright. As long as he had this warm touch and the intoxicating scent enveloping his entire body, he could breathe anywhere.

The lovemaking that began in the darkness continued past sunrise, and even as the sun set in the west.

Yuder had experienced long lovemaking sessions before, but this time, the atmosphere and intensity of passion were different. Previously, if Yuder felt tired or overly intoxicated with pleasure, the act would naturally slow down. Kishiar would then enjoy talking softly, holding Yuder on top of him, or gently stroking and kissing.

However, this time, even as Yuder lay spent from excessive pleasure, the act did not cease. Neither Yuder wanted it to stop, nor did Kishiar hide his desire to continue, hence there was no reason for a lull.

“Uh, hmm, ah…”

In the lingering pleasure that endured like an unextinguished ember, Kishiar sat against the wall, ceaselessly rocking the body of Yuder, who sat atop him, embraced like a child. The fingertips clutching his thighs were slick with sweat that seeped down to the more intimate flesh beneath. Every time his long fingers fiercely gripped and spread Yuders hips, lifting them upwards only to relax again, Yuder trembled intermittently, moaning under the weight of his own body, feeling the depths of their union more profoundly than ever.

Each time the fully inserted member seemed to pierce through to his solar plexus, pushing up the inner walls, Yuder’s breath hitched. The mucous membrane, accustomed to being compressed and abraded, relished the pressure with unchanging ecstasy. Even when his stomach felt utterly melted and deflated, it remained insatiably greedy.

Kishiar, too, with eyes ablaze with equal fervor, watched every reaction of Yuder’s body. He missed not a single quiver or muffled moan, devouring and absorbing each one. Though his usually eloquent tongue ceased its flow of words, it was now fully employed in tasting Yuder.

And this tasting was not metaphorical but quite literal.

Throughout their entwined bodies, Kishiar’s hands and tongue lingered on various parts of Yuder. Fingers and toes, the insides of wrists and calves, the inner thighs revealed by splayed legs, the outlined tendons and the member, even the eyelashes and hair clumped with moisture, all indiscriminately found their way into the mans mouth.

Later, the sensation of his nose buried in the hair and his teeth lightly grazing was enough to bring a mild climax. The chest, most suckled upon, swelled red, throbbing with pleasure at the slightest touch. And Yuder, too, in his own way, urged Kishiar on, fiercely

swaying his hips to the rhythm they both desired, though their paths differed.

Kishiar moved as if discovering and fully consuming every flavor of Yuder’s body was his sole purpose. Even the scent that wafted freely, following his master’s desire, wrapped around Yuder, his fragrance and body, with the tongue delving into every pore.

It was a lovemaking persistent, stubborn, and unyielding, embodying the very essence of Kishiar La Orr himself.

“Ah, uh, hmm, oh”

Another climax surged, resonating deep within his belly. The root of the member tingled and writhed of its own accord. Yuder, feeling a slight strength return to his limp arms, flailed his head resting on Kishiar’s shoulder. As the melted opening twitched, hot fluid flowed out with each pulse.

“Hmm”

Kishiar exhaled rapidly, his tongue invading Yuder’s ear. The squelching sound filled one ear, the dual penetration sending waves of pleasure directly to the brain.

The hand supporting Yuder’s clenched buttocks rose, revealing the thickly embedded member. It seemed unbelievable that something so large had been inside, as the sensation of it slipping out through the membrane made Yuder tilt his head back and moan.

“Ah!”

With a reflexive tension in his thighs and an emptied belly gasping for breath, there was a momentary pause.

Then, as the hand on the buttocks gently released its grip, the body plummeted downward.

“Huh”

The member slid back inside, forcefully returning to its original position. The pleasure points were all scraped simultaneously, and the sensation of the inner walls being pierced made Yuder climax once again.

“Ahugh”

The toes curled and a bright, flickering light danced before the eyes. A deep, muffled moan, tinged with intense red heat, enough to startle anyone, escaped in a hoarse whisper. Pressed against the belly of Kishiar, the arousal of Yuder surged, clear liquid spurting from its tip.

Yuder, reveling in the sensation of Kishiar greedily licking and biting inside him, rhythmically clenched his hips. With each movement, Kishiar’s scent, as if approving, penetrated deep into his skin. The climax seemed unending.

“Ah…”

The pleasure felt when scent and flesh’s desire merged was unlike any before. It was as if every part of Yuder’s being disintegrated into grains of sand, to be devoured by Kishiar in a grand ecstasy. Kishiar, too, seemed to be engulfed in the same pleasure, remaining motionless inside Yuder for a long while.

After the pleasure had somewhat subsided, Yuder, regaining some strength, toppled the man who nonchalantly licked what Yuder had released. He straddled him, his still potent arousal mashed between their thighs. He buried his face in the chest, gasping for breath, while the sound of a beating heart echoed in his ears.

The rapid heartbeat signaled a return of strength to his weary limbs, reigniting an unextinguished ember within.

“Whew, haa…”

Kishiar’s scent, caressing Yuder’s back, seemed to detect his desire, boldly exploring between his hips. Yuder responded, releasing his scent, fiercely pulling Kishiar closer. Fingers glided into the open space, swirling inside, as a clear, semen-mixed fluid poured out, soaking both Kishiar’s body and the floor.

Realizing there was more to be released, Yuder moved his lower body, slickly rubbing up and down. Though his waist lacked the strength for vigorous movement, the sensation of sensitive flesh and the loosened opening colliding and rubbing against Kishiar was unmistakable.

Yuder, seeking solace, twitched his lower body, gripping the fingers exploring inside, eliciting a faint laugh as they withdrew.

Wet hands then spread Yuder’s legs wider, aligning the tip at the gaping opening. The moment the gaping space eagerly clenched and relaxed, desiring the impending pleasure, Kishiar’s arousal penetrated deeply into Yuder’s waiting body.

“Ah…”

A tingling shock ran to the back of his head.

The sensation of being filled, momentarily vacant, returned with a stronger internal impact than before.

But that too was fleeting, as the pleasure of satisfying his hungry insides began to drench his body again with rapid collisions.

The pleasure continued endlessly. Even in brief moments of rest, Yuder experienced a secret ecstasy, feeling the man embracing his body continuing to move inside him, exhaling hot breaths of satisfaction. Waking, he swallowed saliva instead of a meal, smiling as Kishiar nibbled his ankle bone before resuming their prior

activities. Whenever Yuder smiled, Kishiar would kiss him ecstatically, as if his brief laughter was like a winter sun.

Whenever he licked Yuder's skin, no matter how weary he was, a remarkable strength surged through his body. Even when his arousal was less than half-awake, there was no hindrance to the pleasure he felt.

The small house, with nothing more than a thoroughly ruined straw bed, was repeatedly soaked with scent and fluid.

It was only after a period long enough for even the tips of his hair to be imbued with Kishiar's fragrance that Yuder was finally able to form coherent thoughts. This clarity came five days later.

"…I'm a bit hungry, it seems."

Lying atop Kishiar's chest, Yuder blinked blankly, feeling hunger for the first time in what seemed like ages.

"Is it morning…?"

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Chapter 620

“Is it morning…?”

As his eyes moved to glance outside, slender rays of sunlight were seeping in. He couldn’t tell the exact time, but judging by the dim light, it was clear that the sun had risen not too long ago.

It was only then that he truly confronted the state of the cabin, which was in utter disarray. The makeshift bed, made of dried straw covered with cloth, had lost its original shape, spewing its innards here and there. The corner was littered with various items that had fallen or been scattered.

The liquid stains scattered across the walls and floor, and the finger-shaped indentations, spoke volumes. The overpowering scent of two rich fragrances permeated the small space, leaving no doubt about the events that had transpired there.

“…”

Yuder recalled the first manifestation of his second gender in his previous life as he looked at these traces. Before losing consciousness to the heat of his mating season, the despair-filled scene of that office had briefly flashed in his mind, and it bore a striking resemblance to the cabin before him now.

However, there was a significant difference between then and now. Yuder, looking at the storm-ravaged scene, felt no despair.

His thoughts were solely focused on a cool and detached assessment of reality.

…I’ll clean up later.

His body was so languid and relaxed that he didn’t even want to twitch a finger. It wasn’t so much fatigue as it was a sensation akin to the fullness after a hearty meal. He couldn’t quite explain the disparity between the hunger he felt in his empty stomach and the satisfaction in his body, but his mind seemed mostly clear.

I think my strength… has somewhat recovered.

He could feel it without having to use his powers. The sensation wasn’t entirely back to normal, likely due to the lingering effects of his heat period.

The fact that he didn’t immediately get up and move around when he felt hungry, preferring instead to stay entwined in the warm embrace, was evidence enough that the aftereffects hadn’t completely worn off. Yuder exhaled thinly, listening to the rhythmic heartbeat against his cheek where he lay on the chest.

Then, the man holding him opened his eyelids smoothly.

Without asking if he had awoken, Kishiar blinked slowly several times and drew Yuder’s body closer. As their faces neared, he stared into his eyes, which soon swirled red. Their lips naturally overlapped.

“Mmm…”

The moment their tongues gently entwined, a tingling sensation spread from the root of his tongue down his spine. In the languid pleasure that seemed to drain the strength from his body, Yuder felt a reflexive tension in his waist.

The thought of hunger returned only after the long kiss had ended.

“…Aren’t you hungry?”

It felt like a long time since he had used his voice. There was a slight sting in the back of his throat. His voice, half-lost, felt strangely unfamiliar. Kishiar responded by pressing his lips against Yuder's nose.

"It's been five days; it's natural to be hungry. Are you feeling a bit better now?"

His voice was also husky, but Kishiar, always possessing a pleasant voice, didn't sound odd at all.

'Actually…'

He had never thought a husky voice could be sexually stimulating, but now, he could understand why someone might think that.

The man, who always spoke with a strong and clear voice, now whispered languidly, causing a tingling sensation deep in his chest. It felt as if he was witnessing something incredibly rare and special.

"Wait. But how many days have passed?"

Yuder spoke, trying to ignore the flickering embers of strength within him.

"Has it been five days?"

"Since you entered here, the sun has set and risen five times, so it seems so."

""

Though slightly perplexed, Yuder counted the days in his feverish memories and soon nodded in agreement.

'I must be hungry by now.'

During their heat period, the Awakener’s bodies suppress all desires and responses, except for those related to sexual urges. They hardly feel any effect from not eating or sleeping until the end. This is why Awakeners who take sleeping pills and force themselves to sleep, not eating for days, remain surprisingly unharmed.

Some birds in the north survive their lengthy mating season without eating anything, so perhaps the Awakeners, too, burn through their accumulated life force during their heat period.

‘But even if that’s the case for me, what about Kishiar’

As far as he remembered, Kishiar had not left his side since they entered this place. Even if he managed to sneak out for brief moments, it seemed impossible for him to have eaten anything, and Yuder couldn’t help but worry as he looked at him intently. He seemed to read his mind and answered.

“I’m fine. If I were so frail to collapse after just five days, I wouldn’t have lasted this long.”

“Still You didn’t have to endure this. You could have just pushed me away and gone out to eat.”

With Kishiar’s abilities, he could easily have caught something to eat comfortably. He could have also contacted Nathan Zuckerman occasionally for food It seemed unnecessary for him to starve with Yuder, and as he regretted this, Kishiar laughed briefly.

“Why are you laughing?”

“No, it’s just You’re still you, no matter the circumstance.”

Yuder stared at him, not quite understanding his meaning. He continued.

“You fiercely ordered me not to hold back for these five days, and now you wonder why I did.”

””

Had he done that? His fevered mind slowly recalled the past.

‘So, I did.’

With words, body, or scent, Yuder had relentlessly tried to break down his walls. Whenever he showed any sign of restraint, he aggressively encouraged him to let everything out. He had been like a wild beast.

Yuder understood perfectly why he had done it, but it also felt like something he wouldn’t do, a side effect of the heat period.

But that didn’t mean he had nothing to say.

“The ‘not holding back’ I mentioned then and what I’m referring to now are different. I meant”

“I know. You mean there was no need to go without food during the heat period.”

””

As Yuder pursed his lips, Kishiar continued with a feigned look of injustice, smiling.

“But let me be clear, I never really held back this time. If you look at the state of this house, you and I, it would be unfair to say otherwise.”

Kishiar’s gaze drifted towards the lower half of their bodies, stained with the evidence of his unrestrained passion. If one were to say that this was the most significant mark of his lack of restraint, it wouldn’t be entirely incorrect.

‘I remember telling him before that if our heat periods weren’t overlapping, there was no need to worry about consequences, yet he rarely finished inside.’

Honestly, Yuder preferred it when Kishiar released inside. More precisely, he relished the thrill of being intimately connected when Kishiar reached his peak.

The chances of successful reproduction among second gender Awakeners were exceedingly low, especially when their primary genders matched. Even during overlapping heat periods, the likelihood of conceiving was slim. In a world struggling for survival, finding an Awakener who managed to conceive under such rare circumstances was even rarer.

There were a few instances in his previous lives where an unplanned overlap of heat periods with a partner led to pregnancy, but that wasn’t the case with Yuder.

‘Perhaps back then… it was because Kishiars vessel was already deeply cracked.’

It was impossible to know what Kishiar from a past life thought about this matter. However, in this life, even knowing the slim chances, Kishiar was always cautious.

But this time, for the first time, he let go of his reservations and released himself into him as he wished. Yuder still vividly remembered the overwhelming sensation of warmth filling him.

‘Pregnancy, huh…’

The word, once seeming from a world entirely different from his, now felt earnestly real for the first time, perhaps an aftermath of his heat period.

He had never contemplated having a child to continue his bloodline. After his grandfather's passing, he never felt the need for kin, as more pressing matters occupied his mind. He was certain this would remain unchanged. But what about the current Kishiar?

Had the man, who had grown accustomed to living as a Duke unable to leave an heir and later became a second gender Awakener, ever entertained such thoughts?

Lost in these unfamiliar ponderings, Yuder abruptly brushed them aside when Kishiar spoke.

"Skipping meals was less important than what I desired right in front of me, so I did as I wished. Frankly, I'm not that hungry now. What I crave is not elsewhere, but right here."

His words were laden with a blatant sexual undertone, yet at the same time, they carried a profound desire to consume in the most literal sense. Yuder recalled how Kishiar had relentlessly licked, sucked, and devoured every inch of his body, biting his lip as a sudden surge of heat rekindled deep within him.

"So… are you alright otherwise? No issues apart from hunger?"

"…There are none."

"Yes. Perhaps it's time to rise. Water is here, but for a meal, the rest must be fetched from outside

Kishiar hesitated for a moment as he tried to rise. It was because of Yuder, who pressed down on his chest, lifting his upper body to prevent Kishiar from getting up.

Before that.

Yuder, while conversing, glanced down at his rejuvenated manhood, wetting his lips with his tongue. A slow flame flickered in

his cool, dark eyes.

It seems there’s something else that needs resolving.

You said you were hungry, didnt you?

Kishiar softened his eyebrows and smiled. However, his eyes were already intensely fixed on the man with black hair above him.

It’s a problem that you said such things, Commander. Now that the fire has been ignited, what can we do?

Yes I was wrong to do this to someone still under the effects.

Kishiar firmly grasped Yuder’s buttocks. As he gently spread the flesh, a wet mucus trickled out from the suddenly opened crevice.

Yuder clenched his teeth, feeling the rising heat, and almost simultaneously, the flame in Kishiar’s eyes kindled.

Only after one more time did Yuder finally have the energy to rise and clean the house. His restored abilities were less than half of his usual, but even that was enough to tidy up and organize the small cabin.

While he washed the entire house with water without moving a finger and used the wind to move the remaining items, Kishiar went out and returned with a mountain of fish and fruit. Their luggage, which contained a change of clothes, was also with them. A courier bird was also included.

You’ve brought quite a lot. Where did the courier bird come from?

It came from Nathan. He said he arrived at the destination first and has been doing well for five days.

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Chapter 621

You've brought quite a lot. Where did the courier bird come from?

It came from Nathan. He said he arrived at the destination first and has been doing well for five days.

According to Kishiar, Nathan Zuckerman, who had reached the destination alone, was secretly investigating whether there was any information related to Diarca or the Crown Prince. Incredibly, within less than five days, he seemed to have uncovered something significant related to their goal.

"Though he hasn't written much, as he's still investigating, the fact that Nathan is certain of it suggests it's not just trivial information."

Yuder had worried that the unexpected onset of his heat period, which had cost him five days, might hinder their overall schedule. However, it was a relief that it hadn't. Yuder's previously grave expression softened slightly. Kishiar offered him a fruit with a smile.

"I went to the river and found quite a lot of Quaron ripening nearby. I've only brought the ones that looked good… Would you like to try one?"

Quaron, a winter fruit resembling raspberries, was a favored winter sustenance for wild animals. Yuder popped the clustered, bright red berries into his mouth. Each tiny berry burst with a clean, tart flavor as he chewed. Although different from cultivated fruits, Yuder was accustomed to this taste, having often picked such winter fruits, including Quaron, during his childhood in the mountains.

"It seems to be good," he noted.

“Please, Commander, have some too,” Yuder offered.

Regaining his composure, Yuder noticed that the Quaron Kishiar had been holding were all gone.

“I’m fine. I’ve caught some fish, so I should get ready to cook them.”

Considering Kishiar’s high status, it seemed inappropriate to ask him to do more than just bring the fish, which were surprisingly large and numerous for being caught alone in the river during winter. Even if he had used his powers, the catch was impressively large.

Yuder looked at the pile of fish and shook his head.

“I’ll take care of that. Just rest.”

“I’m still affected by the heat, but I’m not a patient. I grew up in the wild. I can prepare them more quickly.”

Kishiar burst into laughter at his words and then nodded in agreement.

“Alright, do as you wish. But I won’t stop myself from watching and helping, alright?”

Of course, Yuder didn’t object to that. But there was hardly any need for assistance. Yuder changed into fresh clothes and took out a small dagger intended for such miscellaneous tasks.

He skillfully cleaned and cut several fish, summoned water for washing, and then sliced them neatly. He skewered them and cooked them over the fire, controlling the flames with his fingertips to grill the fish to perfection without burning them.

The fish, now deliciously cooked and aromatic, were sprinkled with the juice of the remaining Quarons. The strong tartness of the

berries, though different from raspberries, was effective in masking any fishy taste.

As he finished and looked at the pile of grilled fish, Kishiar asked,

“Is it done?”

“Yes. You can eat now.”

“There was no chance to help.”

Well, hadn’t he said so?

The grilled fish Yuder had prepared was made entirely in his own way; it was neither aesthetically beautiful nor exceptionally tasty. Nevertheless, Kishiar ate every piece of fish Yuder offered him without any refusal. Sitting on the ground, eating grilled fish without chairs or a table, might have seemed a humble sight, but watching Kishiar, one wouldn’t think so.

In fact, even Yuder, who was used to such modest cabins and simple meals, felt like he was sharing a very special experience.

It seemed Yuder wasn’t the only one who felt that way.

“Hmm… Somehow, I feel like even if this were all a dream, I’d believe it,” Kishiar mused.

Yuder remained silent.

“When I caught your scent carried by the wind five days ago, my head felt dizzy. But now, here I am, comfortably sitting and being treated to a meal you prepared yourself. If I had to choose which feels more like a dream, it would definitely be this moment.”

It was the first time Kishiar had spoken of the moment five days ago when Yuder’s heat had just started. Yuder belatedly recalled the Alpha Awakener mercenary he had dealt with.

‘That guy. I had forgotten about him…’

Though Yuder had managed to handle the situation somehow, the scene Kishiar must have witnessed was likely not a pleasant one. Yuder, about to apologize reflexively, swallowed his words upon seeing Kishiar’s red eyes. Instead, he offered his portion of fish to him.

“Please, eat this.”

“Ah.”

The man, with his eyes downcast and lips slightly parted, confidently took the fish, as if he had been waiting to do so from the beginning, with a sly attitude.

But Yuder, instead of feeling ridiculous at this sight, found his gaze continually drawn to Kishiar’s red lips and the movement of his throat. Perhaps it was because they had already crossed a line from which there was no returning.

‘Thinking such things even while eating…’

It was remarkable how strong a desire still lingered in him, despite the heat not having completely subsided.

It didn’t take long for the numerous fish to disappear into their stomachs. During this time, Kishiar gently asked Yuder a few questions.

“Who taught you to cook like this?”

“It’s hardly cooking… But I learned how to catch and prepare fish from my grandfather.”

“So, you often ate like this where you lived?”

“Yes.”

“May I ask what that place was like?”

Though Yuder wasn’t eager to answer such a mundane question, he recalled Kishiar’s previous curiosity about him. Now, with nothing more to hide, he wanted to answer as honestly as possible if Kishiar wished to know.

“What was it like… It was just a mountain, similar to this place. No, it was taller and deeper.”

Though it was not long ago in terms of his physical age, the memories belonged to a place he lived in over a decade ago. Yuder vaguely recounted his old memories of where he had lived.

The small house he shared with his grandfather was a renovated place that once served as a shelter for herb gatherers and woodcutters. The nearest village was a half-day’s descent away, making human contact rare and making him more familiar with animals and plants.

Catching fish in the streams and rivers flowing along the mountain range, gathering herbs and wild vegetables, and occasionally eating animals caught in traps were part of their daily routine. Seasonal berries and woodcutting techniques were all things he learned from his grandfather.

In the depths of the forest, a young boy named Yuder had lived alone without any issues, thanks to the skills his grandfather had taught him for surviving in such an environment.

“Weren’t you scared living alone until you joined the Cavalry? You were quite young.”

“In commoner society, that age is sufficiently old enough to live independently. I never felt scared.”

Even deep in the forest where the nights were so dark one could hardly see in front of themselves, Yuder rarely felt fear. Whether it was strong winds pounding against the old door or encountering large wild animals that were difficult to handle alone, he was unfazed. Since his earliest memories, he had been like thisbrave and not overly sensitive to external stimuli by nature.

However, sometimes he would climb to the top of the tallest tree in the forest and gaze into the distance. He would spend long periods contemplating what lay beyond the faintly visible buildings at the foot of the mountain, the plains, and the lush forests in the distance.

After awakening his powers, these thoughts grew increasingly intense. Following the sun across the sky, he felt that beyond its path lay something far more grand and exciting than the mundane life in the forest.

Perhaps beyond that horizon were people with abilities even more extraordinary than his. Maybe he would encounter things he had never even imagined. The idea of spending his life traveling no farther than down the mountain to sell wood and returning seemed dreadfully dull.

“You had such thoughts?”

“Yes.”

Kishiar, listening to the story, wore an expression of great interest mixed with a tinge of regret.

“You seem a bit disappointed.”

“I can’t help but wonder how cute you must have been back then.”

“Let me clarify… ‘Cute’ is hardly a word that would have suited me.”

Even if he was more innocent back then, Yuder was still Yuder. No matter how one looked at it, he wasn’t the type to be overly praised for his demeanor.

But Kishiar didn’t agree; he just smiled silently in response.

Yuder decided to change the subject.

“Shall I finish tidying up the house now?”

“Yes. It was nice hearing about your past. Share more stories with me later.”

Yuder couldn’t fathom what Kishiar found so interesting about it, but if that was what he wanted…

Silently, Yuder got up and approached a pile of assorted items. Most of the things in the cabin seemed to have been left behind by herb gatherers. Tools with missing parts used for gathering herbs, pieces of torn cloth, and sacks containing dried-up, withered herbs were scattered in disarray.

‘Burning them might be best,’ Yuder thought as his gaze settled on the sacks emitting a musty smell.

It was then that he noticed something. His eyes casually drifted to a spot and stumbled upon a familiar shape.

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Chapter 622

It was then that it happened. Unintentionally, Yuder’s gaze fell upon something familiar amidst the items he was about to burn.

‘That is…’

With swift action, Yuder reached into the pile and pulled out a dirty sack. The sack, covered in dark, blood-red stains and torn with holes, revealed glimpses of shriveled brown lumps inside. At first glance, it was hard to discern their original form, but Yuder seemed to have an inkling of what they were.

Without hesitation, he opened the sack.

‘As I thought.’

His grip on the sack tightened. He bent his head closer to better examine the dark stains. They were old, but one thing was certain:

The stains on the sack were not caused by its contents.

Yuder’s semi-drowsy mind, still not fully recovered from the previous night, suddenly snapped to full alertness.

“Yuder?”

“Commander.”

Kishiar, concerned by Yuder’s odd behavior, had called out his name, and their eyes met. Yuder spoke first.

“How likely do you think it is to find a blood-stained sack containing dried and processed Dudureli mushrooms in such a place?”

Kishiar’s eyes narrowed slightly as he immediately grasped the meaning of Yuder’s words. Yuder held up the sack for him to see.

Inside were indeed the dried and processed Dudureli mushrooms, in a form just before being turned into powder, a poison previously used by Crown Prince Katchian. The condition was abysmal due to prolonged exposure to unfavorable conditions. Their original white color had turned brown, and the smell was unpleasant, indicating partial decay.

However, the presence of some intact pieces inside left no doubt about their identity.

Yuder recognized them easily, thanks to having seen the original form of the Dudureli mushrooms shown to Aishes Shand Apeto by Kishiar before. What caught Yuder’s attention again was the bloodstain on the sack.

Initially, he thought it was liquid seeped from the decaying contents. But on closer inspection, it wasn’t so. The stain was from blood, now faintly emitting the odor of decay, splashed during his earlier cleaning of the house using his powers. None of the other objects nearby bore similar stains.

‘Prince Katchian had sent a servant to a nearby village months ago to secretly bring in these processed Dudureli mushroom poisons. And now, a blood-stained sack of Dudureli mushrooms happens to be here, at a rest stop used by local herbalists… Could this be mere coincidence?’

It couldn’t be.

Yuder, even without Kanna, was certain of his intuition in this matter. This was undoubtedly related to the incident caused by Katchian.

And Kishiar, arriving at the same conclusion, had a similar chill in his gaze as he looked at the sack.

“The servant who purified the poisonous mushrooms and then committed suicide after confessing that everything was his crime as soon as he was caught is one of the cases Nathan is currently pursuing. Perhaps we have found an item that might reveal the identity of the person who dealt with that servant.”

Yuder didn’t believe that the one who had gathered these mushrooms was still alive. The bloodstains on the sack and the fact that no one had sought it until now further solidified his belief.

“If it were Crown Prince Katchian, it wouldn’t be surprising if he had silenced everyone involved with the processed mushrooms immediately after obtaining them,” Yuder mused aloud.

However, unlike in his previous life, the young Katchian likely did not know this yet.

Killing someone is certainly one of the best ways to keep a secret, but the stench of blood that it emits cannot be hidden forever. The traces of those abnormally vanished linger like shadows, incessantly following the murderer. Even the great Yudrain Aile, could not escape this shadow.

Thus, it was highly probable that this sack was a ‘trace’ deliberately hidden by someone who had disappeared.

Buried among other odorous miscellaneous items, Yuder almost failed to recognize it and could have burnt it by mistake. Setting the sack down, he resolved to inspect the other items in the area more thoroughly.

The laxity of his mind, eased while with Kishiar’s company, hardened again in front of the old, hardened bloodstain.

It was just as he was clenching his fist, trying to rid himself of the remaining lethargy through the pain in his palm, that a large hand reached out and grasped his wrist. The hand slowly and gently unfolded each stiff finger.

“Now I can speak,” Kishiar said, looking up at Yuder’s dark, sunken eyes.

“You must think it’s right to leave now that we’ve discovered something urgent, even if you’re not fully recovered? Thinking this much is manageable?”

The accuracy of his words made Yuder’s fingertips twitch. Kishiar continued, looking down at Yuder’s hand in his grasp.

“Don’t do this.”

“…”

“You’re not okay yet. You mustn’t overexert yourself until you’re fully healed. Even if others say it’s fine, I won’t allow it.”

“But…”

At Yuder’s soft mutter, Kishiar’s grip tightened. His intense gaze, though piercing, conveyed a heartfelt pain to Yuder.

“Trust me. Chasing after Katchian’s misdeeds is not that difficult. We can manage it indirectly, maintaining communication from afar. Do you think Nathan and I are insufficient for this task?”

Observing Kishiar, Yuder realized something.

Kishiar’s deliberate use of ‘Katchian’ instead of Crown Prince Katchian, which he usually called him, was intentional. And the reason was probably…

‘Because of me.’

It seemed like something had changed in his attitude as he recalled his previous life. Though confident in deceiving others, he couldn’t deceive Kishiar.

Yuder recalled his own unfamiliar face he had seen through the window while Kishiar slept. He might still be wearing the same expression unknowingly.

Kishiar La Orr now knew that he had once died at the hands of Yuder on the order of Katchian. Yuder couldn’t begin to imagine what feelings that man had experienced upon learning this.

What more could be said here?

In silence, Yuder acknowledged the cold, heavy emotions he hadn’t realized he had been feeling. Slowly, he shook his head.

“No.”

Finally, Kishiar’s eyebrows softened, and a faint smile appeared.

To tell him not to endure, Yuder himself must also learn to let go of the things he had always endured. This realization struck him anew.

Yuder had remained in the cabin that day as well, cradled in Kisiar’s embrace, listening to the heartbeat echoing from within his chest. Each time he heard it, the invisible voids within him seemed to quiet down bit by bit. Later, he realized that the persistent fever, which hadn’t subsided yet, didn’t seem so resentful, perhaps owing to the soothing sound of that heartbeat.

The fever, which had been forcibly suppressed within him, slowly dissipated in the comforting warmth.

—

Yuder stood in a dim darkness.

Why am I here? he thought dazedly, looking down to see a white garment. He immediately recognized it as the ornate uniform of the Cavalry Commander, elaborately embroidered with gold thread, made for the Yudrain Aile.

While he silently observed this familiar yet seemingly long-forgotten attire, a cold voice spoke from beside him.

“New Cavalry Commander, enter the Hall of Honor.”

It was the Chief Attendant of Emperor Katchian. Only when Yuder met his unfeeling gaze did he fully grasp the situation.

This was his appointment ceremony as the Commander. The assembly for his nomination was just beyond the door in front of him. Yuder slowly straightened his attire and took a deep breath.

Whispers from not too far away reached his ears.

“They say he’s utterly cold-blooded, and indeed he seems to be. He doesn’t look happy at all.”

“It’s not cold-blooded, but fear. A commoner in such a position must be terrified.”

Yuder did not turn his head. Hearing these voices only quieted his mind more, and instead of feeling small, a feeling of boredom was already welling up in him.

“Cavalry Commander. Aren’t you going to enter? Is there a problem?”

The Chief Attendant urged him with a hint of annoyance. Just as Yuder was about to respond, a familiar voice came from right behind him.

“Yuder.”

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Chapter 623

Yuder.

His voice was distinctly clear, unlike the other blurred, indistinct voices around. It was as if Yuder was encountering a real, living being among drifting ghosts. He furrowed his brow, feeling a strange sensation like heat spreading through his fingertips as if hot water had been poured over them. Slowly, he turned his eyes.

…

However, there was no one where he turned his head. He thought he had heard a familiar voice, but perhaps it was a mistake.

The door will open soon. We can’t delay any longer.

The chief attendant, unable to wait, urged again. Yuder exhaled deeply and straightened his back. With his limbs aligned and his chin tucked, he assumed the perfect posture he had been taught time and again.

The chief attendant began to say something more, but stopped as he met Yuders piercing black gaze from a higher vantage point. He momentarily closed his lips, but then frowned, seemingly embarrassed to feel intimidated while facing someone of common birth.

Go ahead.

The massive door began to open silently. Yuder started to stride confidently along the red carpet laid before him.

Brilliant light flowed in from the open door. Figures from various holy paintings and angel sculptures on the high ceiling looked down

with smiling faces at Yuder entering alone.

Yuder, with an impassive face, scanned the young Emperor Katchian seated on the throne and a few others standing around him. It was his own inauguration ceremony, but none of those faces were familiar to Yuder. The nobles, in their refined attire, were only assessing the worth of the new Cavalry Commander, not offering congratulations or smiles.

Usually, an inauguration in the Hall of Glory was an honor reserved for positions like the Commander of the Imperial Knights, the Chief Court Mage, or an Imperial Army General, attracting a large crowd.

However, only a few attended Yuder's ceremony, most of whom were there just to impress the Emperor. The absence of fellow Cavalry members left the hall emptier than usual. Minimal decorations made the setting appear even more bleak and unremarkable.

But none of that mattered to Yuder. He wasnt bothered.

Instead, what captured Yuder's attention was a person standing inconspicuously at the end of the red path. Although everyone seemed to ignore his presence, maintaining a distance, Yuder felt strongly aware of him. The tall figure, head and shoulders above the others, couldnt be overlooked by pretending not to see.

Kishiar La Orr.

The last surviving descendant of the previous imperial family wore a not-so-flashy dark-colored outfit today. While it suited him well, Yuder found it odd, being used to seeing him in white ceremonial robes.

Yuder checked only up to that point, turning his head so as not to meet Kishiar's gaze. He continued to walk along the red path.

Kneel, you who have reached this place.

Finally, at the end of the long path, Yuder reached the steps in front of the throne.

As instructed, Yuder knelt on one knee to pay respect. The young, almost boyish-looking Emperor Katchian, with a splendid crown atop his head, looked down at Yuder and then narrowed his eyes, lifting the corners of his mouth.

His expression, too, was not much different from the other nobles who seemed to be assessing Yuder's worth. The only difference was a faint glimmer of mild curiosity, caution, and an indiscernible satisfaction in his eyes.

Whatever reason he had for looking at Yuder like that, Yuder was in no position to ask or be curious about it. He silently bowed his head, listening to the voice coming from above.

The Emperor spoke at length, expressing his hope that the Cavalry would become a stronger pillar for the safety and future of the Orr Empire with its new Commander. Yuder's achievements as a Deputy Commander were hardly mentioned. The speech was filled with noble and elegant language, but its underlying meaning was clear.

Therefore, the new Commander must be like a mountain that supports the rising sun every morning, like the sea that paves the way for fish to swim, sincerely responding to the needs of the Empire.

The Emperor symbolizes the sun, and the people, the fish. In other words, the Emperor was saying to dedicate oneself unconditionally and prove loyalty to him and the Empire.

Don't forget that the excessive treatment you've received so far comes with corresponding responsibilities and costs. If you want to

maintain the name of the Cavalry, you must show a completely different image. The Emperor’s intention was very clear.

After the lengthy speech, Emperor Katchian stood up from his throne and received a ceremonial sword from the chief attendant. He placed the sword twice on Yuder’s shoulder and recited words of blessing. Yuder responded by pressing his lips to the hem of the Emperor’s robe, a vow of eternal service and loyalty.

Emperor Katchian nodded and gestured.

I accept your loyalty. Yudrain Aile.

For the first time, the Emperor called the appointee by name, announcing it to everyone.

The moment he did, the watching nobles were slightly surprised, exchanging glances at the unfamiliar name.

What’s this? I didn’t hear about bestowing a name.

It was an undeniably old-fashioned name, similar to his real name, as if carefully chosen. It was the highest honor the Emperor could bestow on a new retainer at such an event. But the Emperor’s demeanor didn’t seem to suggest that; what was going on?

However, the surprises didn’t end there.

Furthermore, I bestow upon you the title of Count. From now on, you shall stand here as Count Yudrain Aile.

A Count?

Count? I thought at most he would receive a courtesy title.

Maybe a Baron at best, but a Count all at once

This is unbelievable.

But since everyone present was there to impress the young Emperor, their voices werent loud. Despite their shocked and dissatisfied expressions, they only whispered among themselves.

Was the young Emperor and the Diarca Ducal Family, standing behind him, actually placing great expectations on the new Cavalry? Was the seemingly modest inauguration ceremony a ruse to deceive onlookers before bestowing a major reward?

Political implications were rampant in the silent exchange of meaningful looks and signals.

Yuder, unaware of all these signals, simply stood there calmly. He didn’t know that when the Emperor calls someone by a new name at such an event, it usually means he personally chose the name. Hence, he was oblivious to any misunderstandings brewing around him. Even if he had known, he likely wouldn’t have bothered to correct them.

After all, the new name given by the former Commander meant nothing to Yuder.

A formal name that would hardly be used, what did it matter who coined it or bestowed it? He was somewhat surprised to receive the Count title, as he hadn’t anticipated that, but it was nearly the same to him.

Receiving a title didn’t suddenly change where he lived or what he had to do. It was more meaningful to show his abilities and make a difference with his changed attitude than to rely on the weight of a title.

However, just because he felt that way didn’t mean others did.

Emperor Katchian, who had bestowed the name and title upon Yuder, turned his eyes away with a faintly crooked smile. Duke

Peletta, who stood quietly in the shadows, bowed his head very slowly as his eyes met the Emperor’s.

His gesture seemed like a show of gratitude, or perhaps an acknowledgment of his defeat. The Emperor’s smile deepened significantly as he watched Duke Peletta, who seemed ready to leave. Suddenly, the Emperor spoke out loud.

By the way, we should have had a retirement ceremony for the former Commander The country has been in turmoil, and we never found the time. What a pity.

At the young Emperor’s words, everyone’s eyes turned to Kishiar La Orr. The man who was about to leave stopped in his tracks. A brief silence followed, and then the man turned his head back.

In that momentary pause, the surrounding nobles tensed up without realizing it, but the man who showed his face was smiling like a fool, as if oblivious to the insult.

I think Ive worked long enough… Arent retirement ceremonies for older people with too much time on their hands? After standing so long today, I just want to go back and drink some 70-year-old Kulavang wine that came in yesterday.

His expression was so foolishly relaxed that even the nobles, who had no loyalty to the former imperial family, felt oddly stirred.

Was this foolish man really aware of the situation? Did he understand that he was the only direct descendant of the first Emperor left, and the attention and burden that would follow?

He had even let go of his only real weapon, the position of the Cavalry Commander. Duke Peletta seemed indifferent even to his rumored successor. Looking at his carefree face, full of thoughts of eating, drinking, and playing, it was hard to believe the rumors that he had toyed with the new Commander.

Ha… Haha.

Emperor Katchian laughed with a similar sentiment in his eyes.

As the Emperor laughed, the nobles also started to chuckle awkwardly and quietly, looking around. The laughter gradually grew more widespread.

Still, it would be a shame to send you off like this without greeting the new Commander, wouldnt it?

I suppose… I dont really know.

The man, looking at Yuder, tilted his head and then smiled again.

Well, if a greeting is necessary, then it must be done.

Yuder watched the man walking towards him. With no emotion, the man lifted the corners of his mouth in an exaggerated manner, bowed before Yuder, and before he could say anything, grabbed his hand.

Then he slid his lips down from the back of Yuders hand to the fingertips, kissing it smoothly.

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Chapter 624

Before anyone could express their surprise at the fact that a Duke of imperial descent had behaved in such a manner towards a commoner, Yuder’s expression, which had been blank for a moment, contorted, and he violently withdrew his hand as if it had been burned.

”

Disgust. Confusion. Anger.

And all other negative emotions that he could not hide were openly displayed.

The fierce emotions that swept through his wide-open eyes were laid bare for all to see.

Gradually, the laughter around them died down, and silence fell.

As Yuder exhaled a hot breath between his tightly clenched lips, Kishiar suddenly burst into clear laughter.

Oh, did you not like that? Now that you’ve become the Commander of the Cavalry, I thought you’d be worthy of such a greeting. It seems my little joke has elicited quite the response.

Everyone gasped as they saw the scratch on the lips of Duke Peletta, who had just raised his head. The man who nonchalantly rubbed the slightly bleeding wound seemed to ponder what more to say before adding just one more sentence.

Hmm Well then, Count Yudrain Aile. I wish you well as the new Cavalry Commander from afar. Though, anyone would probably do a more sincere job than me. Anyway, take care.

With a nonchalant greeting and a wry smile, Kishiar turned his back before getting a response. He approached Emperor Katchian, who had been observing the situation, to bid farewell.

Then, I shall take my leave now. I am about to depart for Peletta and have much to do before I go.

It was clear from his expression that he wasn't actually busy with many tasks. Emperor Katchian, hearing his sophisticated yet frivolous tone, nodded with a cool smile.

Then, there's nothing to be done about it.

After showing his respect, Kishiar withdrew. As he moved away, the nobles, who had been silent until then, began to chatter and laugh again.

It wasn't unusual for the carefree Duke Peletta to draw criticism for his thoughtless actions, especially when he ended up bleeding from his mouth for trying to mock someone of common birth. It was so typical of him that it was almost laughable.

Who said that the new Commander stood in Duke Peletta's shadow at this gathering? He seemed like nothing but an enemy.

It seems that even Duke Peletta can only toy with the Cavalry for so long, and that was all there was to it.

After a few comments, people quickly forgot about him. Instead, their thoughts were filled with the new Emperor, who had shown a dignified and unshakeable power, unlike the previous imperial family, whose influence had completely waned.

Contrary to everyone's expectations that the Cavalry would be disbanded, the young Emperor had instead bestowed a great title and opportunity on the new Cavalry Commander. Wouldn't those who had been loyally serving the Emperor, even if they were of

common birth, receive recognition? The thought quickly spread that under Emperor Katchian's reign, even those who had been unfairly pushed out of the center of power due to lack of family influence might now dream of new opportunities.

The nobles, quick to notice the changing tides of history, congratulated themselves for being there and began to make their calculations. Emperor Katchian, too, smiled willingly at their greedy gazes, his face suggesting he already knew what they were thinking.

The fact that a common-born novice had been granted such an overflowing title and name no longer attracted anyone's interest.

And there was Yuder, silently watching the back of Kishiar as he opened the door and left alone.

Could this be the last time with Kishiar La Orr?

He hadn't imagined a beautiful ending, but he never expected it to end like this either.

An indescribable feeling welled up in him, but the inexperienced youth didn't know how to express or resolve it.

Yuder watched the man disappear beyond the door without looking back even once and clenched his fist. Just as he was about to turn away with the cold wind and head toward the opposite exit,

If you grip your fist that tightly, you might hurt your hand.

Yuder stopped in his tracks as if he had seen a ghost. The man who had just disappeared was now standing in front of him.

How could this be? Yuder stepped back in surprise and caution, and the man smiled with softened eyebrows. It was a smile that seemed fragile and pained.

Yuder saw a smile he had never seen before, yet it was strangely familiar, and the unfamiliar Kishiar La Orr spoke.

Can you see me now? So, who am I?

Kishiar, La Orr.

Thats right.

Yuder then realized something. Initially too shocked to recognize him, the man’s attire was completely different from that of Duke Peleta, who was just in front of him. He was dressed simply, as if about to travel, and his complexion and eyes were different from before in a way.

If he had to describe it, it felt more like a living person.

Quickly looking around, he saw the nobles still bustling. Emperor Katchian was quietly talking with the chief attendant. They seemed oblivious to Duke Peletas disappearance and his return in a different form. Only Yuder seemed to see Kishiar here.

How could this be possible? Lost in thought, the man slowly continued.

Its time to wake up from this dream.

A dream? This?

It seemed unbelievable. Yet as he turned his head, the faces of the nobles and the emperor began to blur strangely. The Hall of Glory they stood in did the same.

Yuder, feeling the ground beneath him turn into darkness, reflexively grabbed the man in front of him. The man did not push Yuder away but instead held him tightly, as if invisible strings were binding them together.

Feeling the familiar scent from his embrace, Yuder faintly felt his mind waver.

Ah.

Yes. Now it seems clear.

All that he had just seen was something he had experienced before

Suddenly, a feeling of deep falling engulfed them. They fell like leaves into an abyss. Yuder clenched the embraced body tightly, gritted his teeth, and… opened his eyes wide.

Breathing heavily, he saw the shabby walls of a cabin beyond his breath.

A dream

He had experienced dreams of the past many times, but this dream was somewhat strange. The situation at the appointment ceremony was one thing, but what about Kishiar suddenly appearing in the middle of it?

Kishiar, who suddenly intruded midway through the dream, was wearing the same clothes as the man currently embracing Yuder with his eyes closed. This had never happened in his past dreams before Could it be an effect of the heat period?

As Yuder pondered whether to wake the man with his eyes closed, lost in thought, the lashes of Kishiar fluttered slightly. A moment later, his eyelids opened, revealing his bright red eyes without a hint of sleepiness.

The man, after silently observing Yuder’s features for a while, quietly spoke.

…I once wondered why you reacted differently to the same action. I couldn’t figure out why you welcomed a kiss on the forehead or cheek, yet recoiled from one on the back of the hand.

Yuder felt a sudden sinking feeling in his chest.

Kishiar looked down, a faint smile on his face.

Now I understand the answer.

Commander. You couldnt mean, just now in the dream…

Before Yuder could finish, Kishiar pulled him in closer with a stronger embrace.

Yes. It was me.

The idea that they had shared the same dream was already hard to believe, but this time, Kishiar had entered Yuder’s dream with clear consciousness.

Even though he now knew what had happened in his past life, seeing it directly like this was a vastly different experience. It might even be better than seeing his own death, but remembering how until recently Kishiar had been endlessly reviewing the strategy game without even sleeping in secret, Yuder was at a loss for words.

…I didn’t intend for it. That

It’s okay.

Before Yuder could slowly speak, Kishiar firmly replied.

I was a bit surprised when I realized it was your dream. You didn’t seem to fully recognize me, so I just followed and watched you. I never thought I’d see my previous game-self in this way…

After a brief pause, as if choosing his words, the man chuckled.

…Seeing it firsthand, I guess I feel relieved.

Relieved? It was a different response than Yuder had expected.

But looking at his expression, he didn’t seem to be lying. Even employing all his senses and subtle connections, he felt the same.

Still, Yuder cautiously sought confirmation.

Really?

I’ve really lost a lot of trust after the last incident. It’s easy to destroy but hard to build, isn’t it?

Kishiar made a pained face as he shook his head, then tapped Yuder’s head with a clearer smile than before.

But it’s true.

…

I won’t ask how you felt then. I don’t wish to.

Kishiar asked if he could talk about his impressions and question him. Slowly, Yuder nodded in unfamiliar feelings.

…Yes.

It took a little while for Kishiar to start speaking, unlike his playful words earlier. He caressed Yuder’s hair and back for a long time, lost in thought, then slowly began to speak.

Your outfit was really beautiful.

…I’ve never thought that way.

No. At first, I thought it was the same as mine, but upon closer inspection, I realized the embroidery and fabric were quite different

from mine. But then… a question arose.

What is it?

I once saw you in a Commander’s outfit in the illusion of Nahan.

Kishiar, with an unsmiling face, brought up something unexpected.

The outfit I saw then was the same as the one in the dream.

…That’s…

I didn’t think much about it then, as the illusion itself was the issue. I only recognized that you were wearing a Commander’s outfit. But seeing an outfit that I had never seen before in an illusion, what should I think of that?

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Chapter 625

I didn’t think much about it then, as the illusion itself was the issue. I only recognized that you were wearing a Commander’s outfit. But seeing an outfit that I had never seen before in an illusion, what should I think of that?

Yuder tried to think of another possibility where all these discrepancies could fit together as he looked into his sunken red eyes. However, everything he thought of felt like mere speculation, and it was difficult to be certain.

Kishiar continued speaking as he looked at the thoughtful Yuder.

“I’ve said this before, but I never found that illusion frightening in the least. I even speculated that perhaps that person had used a different illusion on me, one that didn’t incite fear.”

Yuder had thought the same thing.

Yuder, as seen by Kishiar in the illusion, was wearing the Cavalry Commander’s uniform.

It seemed utterly unrelated to be a product of Nahan’s illusions, which were known for drawing out and exaggerating the hidden fears of people.

Kishiar said that he never suspected Yuder of coveting the position of Cavalry Commander or found it frightening. Yuder had never felt differently about this. Therefore, Kishiar speculated that it might have been a reflection of his subconscious anxiety after seeing Yuder, who had almost died facing Pethuamet.

But considering it, Nahan knew what illusion Yuder had seen in the East before. If he had seen the previous life’s Kishiar

approaching while calling out the name “Yudrain” in a bloodied Commander’s uniform, it was likely that Nahan, not knowing about the previous life, thought Yuder genuinely feared and wanted to kill his own Commander.

Then, wasn’t it a rather clever choice for the illusion to show Yuder in a Commander’s uniform to surprise Kishiar and sow discord?

Kishiar’s speculation that the illusion wasn’t one that stimulated fear but one created by Nahan himself seemed quite logical.

The fact that Kishiar didn’t feel fear when he saw the illusion added credibility to this speculation.

But for this speculation to be true, the Commander’s uniform Yuder wore in the illusion had to be Kishiar’s. The uniform of Commander Yudrein Aile was very similar to Kishiar’s, but upon close inspection, it wasn’t exactly the same.

“But you know, when I saw myself from the previous game in a dream.”

Kishiar’s voice continued. His gaze was blurred, staring at something unknown.

“In the expression on your face as you stood alone, I felt the very fear I had never experienced seeing that same sight.”

It felt like a faint murmur thundering powerfully in his head.

Yuder quickly shook his head.

“That’s impossible.”

Kishiar had seen it too. Throughout the Commander’s appointment ceremony, the attitude of Kishiar La Orr at that time did

not seem to feel such emotion at all. Fear? That didn’t make any sense.

“Do you think so?”

“There’s no reason for it.”

“There’s no reason.”

Kishiar repeated Yuder’s words and fell silent for a moment. Yuder realized that his breathing had quickened only after feeling Kishiar’s hand gently stroking his back.

After calming his sharply heightened senses, Kishiar spoke again.

“I have a question for you. Who made the outfit you wore in the dream?”

Yuder, seemingly already guessing the answer, sighed and responded while looking at the man.

“It was the Cavalry Commander at that time.”

Back then, Yuder hadn’t even considered getting a new uniform for himself, anticipating a promotion to the Commander’s position. He thought it would be sufficient to obtain and tailor one of the many uniforms that Kishiar wouldn’t wear anymore.

The previous life’s Kishiar had taken measurements of Yuder, specifying the material and the pattern of the embroidery, and had a new uniform made from scratch for him.

Yuder had guessed that it was probably due to Kishiar’s pride.

He remembered how annoyed he was, having to go out for the fitting, thinking it was a waste of time and money, and that he would rather continue wearing his usual clothes.

But in the end, he wore the outfit Kishiar had prepared on the day of the appointment ceremony.

Until his death, Yuder's uniform remained unchanged from that design. First, because he thought it better to use his energy on other matters than changing uniforms, and second, because the uniform was designed to not go out of fashion despite long use.

A faint smile appeared and then disappeared on the man's face as he listened to Yuder's answer, as if he had expected it.

"There are many types of fear. The instinctive, intuitive fear for life engraved in our instincts. Or the vague fear of imagination, like fearing ghosts or spirits. And many more. I'm not afraid of a knife at my throat or ghosts, but there's one thing. I've often thought it frightening to face an ambiguous yet foreseeable future."

An ambiguous yet foreseeable future. It was a seemingly difficult concept to understand.

"Could you give an example?"

"Like when I knew that I would eventually die violently, yet I had to sleep to face the next day. Or when I felt the cycle approaching but could do nothing about it."

"…"

"The strongest I ever felt that emotion was during the late Emperor's funeral. It was the first time I thought there was nothing more powerless and frightening than just looking at the reality in front of me, while I could clearly imagine what would happen to me, my brother, and this country in the future."

So… did Yuder feel that the scene in his dream might have been a similar situation for Kishiar back then?

It seemed unlikely, but looking at Kishiar's face made him confused.

Even if the previous life's Kishiar had been afraid of seeing himself in the Commander's uniform, it was Kishiar who had left the position and departed first. It was a matter too far gone to reconsider now…

As Yuder remained silent, Kishiar embraced him tightly.

"I didn't bring this up to make you rethink about me from the previous game or to change anything. There's no need for that."

"Then, what conclusion are you trying to reach with this story?"

"If Nahan's illusion was indeed meant to evoke fear in me, and the illusion I saw of you was indeed from a previous life… maybe it reflected the fear of a 'me' that is me, but not the current 'me'."

Yuder's heart clenched tightly for a moment.

So… does it mean that Nahan used his ability to create an illusion of fear, but for some unknown reason, it manifested the 'fear' felt by a previous life of Kishiar, not the current one?

"It's impossible…"

"I… don't really know. It seems impossible to me."

"Think it through step by step, based on the facts that have been revealed," Kishiar said softly.

"The more urgent a situation, the more likely a person is to revert to familiar methods without thinking. Nahan was about to be caught and killed at that time. In such a situation, he would likely use a power he was familiar with and had often used. That power, as we have seen, is to evoke and reveal the target's fear."

Indeed, the most frequently used power by Nahan against his enemies had been to stimulate fear. In a situation where he was about to be captured by someone as formidable as Kishiar, there wouldn't have been much room to devise something new.

"The me here and now wouldn't be afraid even if you appeared in that uniform again. But the man I saw in your dream, he didn't seem unafraid. Even if it seems illogical, if something has already happened and there are fitting pieces, shouldn't we keep the possibility open?"

If a person could return from the dead to the past, why couldn't other things be believed? It seemed Kishiar was applying the same reasoning to himself that he had accepted when he believed in Yuder's return.

"Think about the dreams I've had but don't remember, the strange connection between us that seems to be strengthening since we've been together… Maybe that illusion was also related to that."

Hearing that, Yuder reflexively remembered the time Kishiar had called out 'Yudrain' in his sleep.

The chilling memory of that day. He hadn't thought further about it due to the shock, but on reflection, that too seemed more related to Kishiar's previous life than this one.

'…Illusions and sleep-talking… I never thought there could be a common phenomenon, but maybe there was.'

The emotions he had dismissed as impossible melted away with a dull ache.

Yuder had always thought of Kishiar in this life and the previous one as the same yet different beings. He had never considered that Kishiar in this life could be related in any way to his previous life.

But now, with the spectral presence of Yuder from the past already here, and their mysterious connection, perhaps it was natural for Kishiar to be entangled in it too.

The thought that somewhere in the unseen depths of the current Kishiar, something from a long-gone past life might exist brought a strange feeling, like a dry throat and stinging eyes.

But the unwavering red eyes facing him looked a bit pained, and Yuder swallowed the sensation.

'…Right.'

Nothing was certain yet. And even if the speculation turned into conviction, in the end, only one thing mattered.

Kishiar La Orr, alive here and now. Just that.

As long as he didn't forget that.

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Chapter 626

Kishiar La Orr, alive here and now. Just that.

As long as he didn’t forget that.

With this thought, he found a sense of calm. He gazed deeply at Kishiar La Orr, trying not to miss any subtle changes, as if seeing him for the first time. Kishiar’s face was refreshingly handsome, warm, and consistently honest. Emotions, never felt before from anyone else, swirled captivatingly in the eyes of this beautiful, noble man, like a sweet dream.

It had taken him a long time to recognize that this Kishiar La Orr was walking a different path from the one in the past. Regardless of what others said or what happened, his vow to stay by Kishiar’s side remained unchanged. He thought he had correctly determined what was important, reflecting on the past, present, and future.

Yet, even after seemingly sorting out his past, present, and future, he couldn’t maintain his usual composure when this situation arose. It meant his heart had not truly settled yet.

Perhaps it’s because I’m always relieved to see the current Kishiar, who is unlike the one from the past.

He felt again the weight of old emotions that he had experienced at the guillotine. These long-suppressed feelings hadn’t disappeared but lingered somewhere in Yuder’s heart. Yuder introspectively peered into this dark swamp, too heavy and deep to fully understand.

Bitter longing. Cold hatred.

Respect and aspiration. Resentment and anger.

An inexplicable yearning. Shadows constricting a murderer’s body.

All mixed together to form Kishiar La Orr.

The only name that could shake Yuder so profoundly.

Kishiar also saw how much Yuder struggled to maintain his composure in front of this conjecture. Knowing that Yuder had no good feelings for him in his previous life, it must not have been easy for Kishiar to discuss this conjecture.

Yet, he spoke his thoughts logically and without emotion, deeming it necessary.

Yuder decided not to forget that he was here now because Kishiar was that kind of man.

Think simply.

While part of his heart ached as if wounded, he didn’t want to be blinded by it and miss what truly mattered.

Enduring a difficult situation wasn’t unique to him alone. Kishiar, too, was enduring unfamiliar pain for Yuder.

Getting entangled in events that had nothing to do with his current self and were unlikely to happen was unpleasant for anyone. The realization that traces of a person he was yet not, existed within him was not a welcome thought.

Yet, the man never once let go of Yuder.

Suddenly, Yuder reached out and gently touched Kishiar’s cheek. As his hand moved naturally over Kishiar’s face, Kishiar softly grasped it, looking down submissively and rubbing his face against it. As their skin touched, their heartbeats almost synchronized.

Without expressing in words or emotions, the sound alone eased some of the pain.

Do you not resent it?

Yuder impulsively asked in a soft voice.

Considering that you are entangled with me in these strange events.

Not at all.

Kishiar immediately replied.

“I have never had such a thought, and I probably never will. The only thought I have right now is just one.”

The man whispered, asking if he knew what it was. As Yuder slowly shook his head, a voice, lowered enough to be just audible, reached his ears.

“The thought of surviving well in the future, and how to see the precious laughter of the one I love for a long time.”

Yuder was speechless for a while.

He wanted to ask back what it was, but a sensation like the crashing of mighty waves struck the edge of his heart.

“…Is that it?”

“What do you mean? It’s a serious issue.”

Kishiar usually jokes like this when he’s hiding his real feelings and being evasive. But right now, he seemed to be truly sincere.

Yuder, dumbfounded, let out a strange breath that was neither a laugh nor a sigh.

“Huh…”

“Yes. Smiling suits you much better.”

Kishiar smiled as if he had painted it.

“Don’t worry too much. What happened this time was certainly surprising, but after all, it’s a thing of the past. Even if I’m curious about the previous game, it can’t be the same as back then. We both know that using the same pieces to play a game doesn’t make it the same game, dont we?”

“…”

“But if you need to, you can use me, hate me, and resent me instead. I’ll gladly accept whatever you give me.”

“That doesn’t seem right. Rather, I should…”

His playfully serious voice was amusing, but in truth, even if Yuder really did it, he would have accepted it willingly. Yuder denied his words, feeling the atmosphere rapidly soften in a surprising way.

It was Kishiar’s power that changed the atmosphere like this. He skillfully embraced Yuder, who didn’t know how to release his pain alone, and helped him gently push his worries to the back.

He realized just how broad-minded Kishiar was, especially at times like this. Indeed, he was an unbeatable opponent…

In the sensation of the still flickering remnants of his unextinguished heat period, Yuder recalled Kishiar in his dream.

Like an unwelcome guest hidden in the shadows, that man stood alone. The Yuder in the dream had turned his face away and did not look at him, so he didn’t know what expression he was wearing, but the current Kishiar said he had read fear in him.

Was that all that the current ‘Kishiar’ had read from there?

He thought it was probably not.

Then, if Yuder asked the questions he had long wondered about but never had answers to, could he answer them?

“Commander.”

“Yes.”

As soon as he called softly, an immediate reply came. Like Yuder, he was not asleep. The sound of his heartbeat became stronger as he slightly tightened his arm around Yuder.

Yuder listened closely and then spoke.

“If, as you said earlier, the Commander of the previous game really felt fear when he saw me in the Commander uniform, then why did you…”

“…”

“No, never mind.”

He intended to ask why he was appointed as the Cavalry Commander, but he felt it was strange to ask someone who was the same yet different. After all, even he wouldn’t know the perfect answer.

“Just go to sleep.”

As Yuder shook his head and exhaled, Kishiar inserted his fingers into his hair and stroked it. As he repeated the action for a long time, the suffocating emotions disappeared, and slowly sleep approached.

Yuder blinked several times and then finally closed his eyes completely. Even after that, the man who continued the same actions whispered as a deep darkness once again fell over the small cabin.

"…Well… Not everything can be known, but one thing is certain. In the act of making new clothes, there is an old wish embedded, hoping that the person will wear them and think of the person who made it."

It was a story originating from an old tradition, unknown to many, but Kishiar knew it.

The man who was hiding his emotions in laughter, shrouded in shadows, surely knew the same fact.

Kishiar stroked his pale cheek, still slightly flushed from the remnants of the heat period. He cuddled Yuder and then closed his eyes in a corner of the small cabin.

The winter wind blowing outside could not invade that place.

—

Another day had passed. Yuder got up from his bed, feeling the aftereffects of the heat period had completely faded.

His body felt surprisingly light and overflowing with energy. He felt as if he could blow away the whole cabin if he wanted to.

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Chapter 627

Another day had passed. Yuder got up from his bed, feeling the aftereffects of the heat period had completely faded.

His body felt surprisingly light and overflowing with energy. He felt as if he could blow away the whole cabin if he wanted to.

“Have you finished cleaning up already?”

Asked Kishiar, who had come out of the cabin after finishing packing and tidying up inside. He had gone out earlier to contact Nathan Zuckerman.

“Yes. Other than a bag of blood-stained Dudureli mushrooms, there was nothing unusual. The scent that had soaked into the interior has almost been washed away, so it should all disappear in a few days.”

Of course, if another second-gender Awakener came in the meantime, they would be able to sense that an Alpha and Omega Awakener had stayed here. Even so, they wouldn’t be able to identify who they were. Yuder had thoroughly erased even the faint traces left around the cabin.

‘It would have been easier to just destroy it and leave…’

Since important items were found in this house, it had to be preserved for evidence. If a cabin that had been fine suddenly collapsed, it would remain in people’s memories, so it was better to go through the trouble in the long run.

“Did you contact Sir Nathan?”

“Yes. He said he’d wait for us at the destination.”

It was good news that there were no problems on Nathan Zuckerman's end.

After nearly a week, Yuder calmly surveyed the landscape outside before leaving the cabin with Kishiar. The mercenaries they had beaten and buried were, of course, nowhere to be seen, as if they had never been there.

Kishiar explained that the Cavalry of the western branch must have come and taken them all away while they were in the cabin.

"I've given orders to detain them at the branch and extract more useful information. There was no time to properly discuss the information we got from them with you due to the situation."

"I feel the same."

It was a relief that they could finally talk about proper work now that the heat period was over. Although they hadn't completely lost the power to think and judge even when instincts were dominant, it was impossible to share complex thoughts like now.

Yuder realized through this experience that it wasn't necessarily a bad thing, but he felt more stable now that he was back to normal.

During their journey to the destination, they shared and discussed the information they had obtained from the mercenaries. The information Kishiar and Nathan had extracted from them almost matched what Yuder had found out.

"I already anticipated that forces trying to sneak in spies or disrupt the recruitment of new members would interfere. But I didn't expect the cautious Duke Diarca to move so boldly…"

"It's highly probable that he didn't bother to intervene if the sage said he would step in."

“Right. Even if they failed, they wouldn’t have thought we’d completely uncover the mastermind.”

“The western part probably used mercenaries because they intended to test the waters, but the real action is likely to follow in the south, where the sage’s base is located.”

“Did you think that far ahead?”

“If I were them, I would have done the same.”

“Right. A real attack always follows after sending scouts to gauge the enemy’s movement. If they’re not fools, they’ll choose to fight on terrain advantageous to them.”

The smooth continuation of their conversation, as if sharing thoughts, brought significant pleasure and exhilaration.

With a pleasant smile, Kishiar faced Yuder and briefly expressed his judgment about the sage.

“This incident has made it clear that the sage may not be as much of a murderer as Nahan, but he’s certainly not any better or good.”

“True. It’s certain that the sage is moving in a somewhat bold manner to expand his influence on both Duke Diarca’s side and the Crown Prince’s side.”

If the sage manages to prove his worth in this incident, it would probably not be difficult for him to achieve his goals. With his ability to brainwash people and the varied powers of the Star of Nagran members at his disposal, one could guess how well he would use this power once he joined hands with the power players.

This was something the fake sage in his previous life had managed to do similarly.

‘No way. Is it possible that Ill see that happen again?’

“As long as we have the mercenaries, there’s no problem with the evidence for this incident, even if not for the palace intrusion. So…”

Looking at the signs of a village starting to appear in the distance, Yuder quietly declared.

“Let’s make it so he can’t even pay attention to the south.”

He had no intention of letting him meddle in the south as he pleased. He would make sure to teach him how difficult it is to meddle from afar.

Seeing Yuder’s eyes, dark as if casting a sinister light, Kishiar burst into laughter.

“Did I ever tell you that my heart races anew every time you say such things?”

“You would have thought the same, Commander.”

“Right.”

Kishiar didn’t deny Yuder’s words.

“Now that we’re about to arrive, it seems we’ve decided on what to send to the western branch and the capital headquarters. I’m really looking forward to it.”

—

In a corner of the seemingly peaceful Bright Palace.

Ajihen Toom, or the sage, as he is known, had a visitor today in his residence. As soon as the sage opened the door, Baron Renbow of the Diarca Duchy’s followers lowered his robed face and began speaking rapidly, his face flushed with anger.

“Those dirty mercenaries from the west. I knew they were disloyal and lazy, but who would have thought they’d run away on the day of the mission! I won’t let them off once I find them!”

“Baron Renbow, please calm down.”

“How can I calm down? The loss from their escape is tremendous. Aren’t you angry, sage? They’ve ruined a task you personally requested!”

“Baron Renbow.”

Renbow, feeling the softly gripping hand of the sage on his shoulder, flinched and shut his mouth. The sage whispered with a smiling face, but with a strange power in his voice.

“I understand your anger, but this is the Crown Prince’s palace. Many are watching and listening. Please calm down and have some tea with me. Then we can talk properly.”

“Ah… Yes, of course. I apologize. I got too excited.”

Renbow, a nobleman known for his pride and reluctance to apologize to anyone, bowed his head in a way that was hard to believe. After composing himself and sitting down in front of the sage, he began to speak again after sipping the tea.

“I’ve heard from the other mercenaries hired to find those mercenaries. Their trail was lost after they left Tainu. There’s a rumor in nearby Palama that they’ve seen a few of them, so they plan to go there. It seems certain that they have indeed escaped.”

“Is that so…”

“Aren’t you angry, sage? I’m already so anxious and worried about how this will turn out. What if those people go somewhere else and start blabbering!”

“It’s alright.”

Surprised by the unexpected response, Renbow looked up. The sage offered him new tea as he spoke.

“Every endeavor carries the possibility of failure, doesn’t it? What worries me more is seeing you so distressed and uncomfortable, Baron.”

“Sage……”

Renbow’s face, which had been filled with anger, softened at the sage’s kind and gentle words. If a third party were to see it, they might find it strangely quick how he calmed down, feeling ashamed, and sat back down with a sigh.

“Yes, you’re right. Even if they do blabber, what could they possibly say?”

After seeing Renbow calm down, the sage asked softly.

“However, I do wonder if it’s really possible for so many people to run away without a single one left. Aren’t you being a bit too hasty in your assumptions?”

“The mercenaries say that these days, it’s not uncommon for people to conspire and escape after receiving such assignments. They say it’s not unusual even for larger and more significant tasks.”

“Is that so……”

“It’s my first time hiring in this way; perhaps I was too lenient. As Duke Diarca said, there are limits to trusting unreliable people.”

The sage’s expression changed slightly at this. He patted Renbow’s hand with an even more benign face.

“Did Duke Diarca say anything about this…?”

“No. He isn’t particularly curious about this matter. He’ll probably only listen when we return successfully. That’s just the kind of person he is.”

Though it wasn’t something one would say to others, Renbow always felt a deep trust in the sage. Initially, he thought the sage was a fraud when he took over this task from Baron Durmand, but now he felt the complete opposite.

The sage helped him without any conditions, something he had long desired to gain favor in Duke Diarca’s eyes. The sage had never divulged any of Renbow’s numerous stories to others, always providing wise and appropriate advice, melting his heart. Who else could he follow if not a person who gives such counsel?

Renbow licked his lips with his tongue, wishing to continue his complaints a bit more. That’s when it happened.

Thud, thud, thud. There was a loud knocking on the door.

“We’re still talking, please come back later.”

The sage briefly rejected the visitor, but the knocking outside grew more intense. An urgent voice was heard.

“Sage. You might want to come out. Nezo went outside and has heard some troubling news!”

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Chapter 628

“Sage. You might want to come out. Nezo went outside and has heard some troubling news!”

At the mention of troubling news, the moment Baron Renbow showed confusion, the sage stood up and opened the door. A young Awakener, Langbarton, nearly rolled in, gasping for breath.

“What do you mean by troubling news?”

“The Cavalry has spread new news throughout the capital, saying they will conduct a major investigation to find those interfering with this round of recruitment. But…”

“But what?”

Baron Renbow, who was listening, asked quickly, realizing it was a matter related to him as well.

“They said for a swift investigation, they plan to closely cooperate with Awakener groups and organizations not affiliated with the Cavalry… But, there…”

“Calm down and speak slowly, Langbarton. Who is the Cavalry planning to collaborate with?”

The sage encouraged Langbarton, whose face had turned pale. Langbarton then steeled his heart and, with trembling lips, spoke.

“…The name of Star of Nagran… was mentioned.”

“What?”

“What are you talking about?”

“That is, in the list or whatever it is of external personnel they’re collaborating with to investigate the forces interfering with the new round of Cavalry recruitment, our Star of Nagran was mentioned!”

Langbarton clenched his eyes shut and shouted. A terrible silence filled the room.

Baron Renbow, his face blank as he tried to understand the meaning of what he’d heard, lost the gentle smile he always wore.

“Sage, it’s clear to me. We’re not cooperating with them, so how can Star of Nagran possibly join forces with the Cavalry? Surely Nahan is colluding with them!”

“…Star of Nagran is what you and the sage call yourselves, isn’t it? But who is this Nahan? Why such a reaction…”

Baron Renbow, his eyes full of incomprehension, alternated his gaze between Langbarton and the sage. The sage, whose smile had faded, drew a deep breath.

“Langbarton. Being too swayed by emotions can negatively affect your judgment and resolution of the situation. Calm down first. And Baron Renbow.”

Baron Renbow’s eyes, filled with confusion and discomfort, met with the sage’s. The sage looked at him intently and whispered slowly but audibly.

“Since the first day we met, I believe there has always been a genuine exchange of hearts between you and us. Trust and reliance don’t require knowing everything. Haven’t you said so yourself?”

“…I have said that, yes.”

The Baron hesitantly replied.

“If we continue to trust each other as we have, I believe we can overcome any difficulty that may arise. Would you trust me and return for today?”

Baron Renbow’s eyes, previously full of doubt, gradually softened. The nobleman, once full of suspicion, now appeared as a trusting friend, taking the sage’s hand and bowing his head.

“I understand. Something seems to have happened, so I’ll return and keep an eye on things here. If there’s anything I can help with, please don’t hesitate to contact me.”

He left the room, asking to be informed as soon as the situation was resolved. The sage turned his gaze to Langbarton, who was simmering in silence, his eyes flashing with anxiety and anger.

“Langbarton. It seems you were quite anxious today.”

“I’m sorry, sage. I was blinded by the urgency to inform you as soon as I heard the news, failing to consider that Baron Renbow does not yet fully understand us.”

“It’s okay. Fortunately, he trusts me deeply. He will willingly keep silent about what he heard today. Everyone can make mistakes when they are anxious. What matters is what happens next.”

“Sage”

Langbarton was once again moved by the sage’s magnanimity, who did not raise his voice despite his mistake, but instead reassured him. Swallowing his pent-up emotions, Langbarton poured out the words he had been holding back.

“I thought it strange that Nahan, who should have contacted our southern base upon his arrival in the capital, had not done so. If those who broke into our previous lodgings and the theft were

indeed their doing, it's hard to view their intentions positively. And now, Star of Nagran is named as a collaborator with the Cavalry!"

If Nahan had come to the capital to meet the sage, he should have first sent a message to the southern base, informing them of his arrival and establishing a connection with the sage's side.

However, he neither informed the southern base of his location nor showed any caution, instead finding out where the sage was staying and intruding uninvited. Given that the letters sent by the southern base to the sage were lost, it seemed clear that Nahan doubted the sage's intentions and was acting on his own.

And now, today's revelation about the Cavalry's list of collaborators.

Was it a coincidence that just as the sage started moving to help Duke Diarca, the Cavalry spread such news? And that Star of Nagran was included, not in a group hindering the Cavalry but rather in a collaborating faction?

"It's absurd. If the Cavalry were to capture us, that's one thing, but how can they talk about collaboration? We don't even know who they are! And among us, who knows them best? Only Nahan!"

The Cavalry had fought several battles with the Awakeners of Star of Nagran, including Nahan. In the process, several of their brethren were captured, but the Cavalry had never officially announced the name "Star of Nagran" to the world.

Langbarton had never found this odd until today.

Nahan must already know whom the sage is currently helping.

To punish and hinder the sage, who is treating the Crown Prince and aiding Duke Diarca, wouldn't the best way be to use the Cavalry, aligned with the Emperor and hostile to both forces?

“Could it be that Nahan, who has encountered them several times, has been secretly communicating with them to hinder the sage? Maybe even the comrades from the west were all lies… If it was all Nahan’s scheme?”

“But Langbarton. I have known Nahan much longer than you. Even if he doesn’t want to agree with our goals, Nahan would not easily join hands with the nobility.”

“I know he hates the nobility. But aren’t most of the Cavalry commoner Awakeners?”

“…”

Langbarton recalled Nahan’s insistence from long ago that the sage should keep his promise to him, adding credibility to his speculation.

“Sage. Do you remember when Nahan rescued other brothers from the east and brought them here? When little Josh, who can control monsters, joined us?”

“Of course, I remember.”

“It was the first time our brothers encountered the Cavalry. Since then, Nahan has clashed with them several times. Was there really nothing between Nahan and the Cavalry? I believe there must have been something we don’t know!”

Surely, Nahan wouldn’t have sincerely joined hands with the Cavalry. But to intimidate the sage and make him comply, could he not have resorted to such measures?

After all, his goal is to leave this empire with everyone and find their own land. For that purpose, who knows if he thought it better to turn everyone into beings who couldn’t live in this country?

Langbarton thought that madman could very well entertain such thoughts.

“Think about it. Who else but him would be crazy enough to collaborate with the Cavalry? Our other brothers and sisters struggling every day in hiding at the base? Or someone among us here? It’s obvious. It’s him. It’s definitely him!”

The sage covered his eyes. He looked deeply troubled. Langbarton, recalling the conversation he had with Nezo after hearing today’s news, comforted the sage.

“But don’t worry, sage. We’ll immediately contact the other bases to prevent chaos from this news and focus on what you wish to do. Everything will work out as you desire. We will help make that possible.”

Langbarton pleaded with him not to meet Nahan, who might be lurking somewhere in the capital, no matter how worried he might be about the others.

After a while, the sage lowered his hand and patted Langbarton with a kind smile.

“Alright. Let’s do that. But even if we don’t contact Nahan for now, we can’t delay finding out where he might be.”

This meant the sage acknowledged the validity in Langbarton and Nezo’s conjectures. It pained him to think that the benevolent sage had to sense the dark intentions of Nahan, but this was the reality unfolding.

“We’re already working on that. We will surely find out where they are.”

The sage had taken on the difficult task of ensuring the safety of everyone at Star of Nagran. Langbarton resolved several times that

they couldn’t just leave the unpredictable and dangerous Nahan to his own devices.

The sage and his followers began focusing almost entirely on tracking down Nahan, setting aside other matters.

As a result, the course of events they were supposed to influence also began to twist and turn.

—

“Welcome. It seems you’ve finally recovered.”

Yuder bowed in greeting to Nathan Zuckerman, who greeted him with an indifferent face. Nathan Zuckerman, dressed like an ordinary mercenary, was staying in an empty house in the village.

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Chapter 629

“Welcome. It seems you have finally recovered.”

Yuder greeted Nathan Zuckerman with a nod, responding to his indifferent greeting. Nathan Zuckerman had been staying in an empty house in the village, dressed like an ordinary mercenary.

Though his face remained stoic as if nothing had happened, Yuder vaguely remembered him from the time of his heat, when only Kishiar and nothing else seemed to matter. At the time, he hadn’t cared about anyone else, but looking back, he realized how embarrassing the situation must have been for Nathan.

But what can I do

What happened had happened. Even in his previous life, he had embarrassed himself before Nathan, but this time felt completely different.

This was partly due to what Kishiar had told him just before coming here.

“I hope you won’t feel sorry or ashamed about Nathan. Unforeseen events can happen to anyone, and Nathan was well aware of the possibility before coming.”

Yuder knew that his heat was approaching even before leaving the capital. Kishiar had included Nathan Zuckerman in the group in anticipation of such an event, and the loyal knight had perfectly handled the aftermath.

“So, when you meet Nathan again, express your gratitude, not an apology. Nathan would prefer that.”

Following Kishiar’s advice, Yuder decided to thank Nathan first.

“Thanks to Sir Zuckerman taking care of things, I was able to recover completely and return. Thank you.”

A fleeting emotion crossed Nathan Zuckerman’s dark navy eyes. The knight hesitated as if to speak, then shook his head politely.

“No. I haven’t done anything significant to deserve thanks.”

“I’m curious about your standard for something significant. From my perspective, what you did was indeed significant.”

“You know that’s not what I mean.”

“Hahaha. Anyway, thank you, Nathan.”

Kishiar, with a playful glint in his eyes, smiled and patted Nathan Zuckerman’s shoulder. This eased the atmosphere among the three. The casual, comfortable air felt strangely new and intriguing to Yuder, unlike when he left things in the hands of comrades like Kanna and Gakane. Entrusting someone like Nathan Zuckerman silently felt different.

Perhaps Kishiar said no more words were needed so Yuder could experience this feeling.

“Then please come in. I’ll give you a proper report of what I’ve seen and heard in the village.”

“Alright.”

Nathan Zuckerman began to explain in his characteristic silent manner.

“As you’ve seen on your way here, this mountain village is really ordinary and small. It belongs to a lord beyond the mountains, but it’s far away, and the total population barely reaches a hundred. Most

residents specialize in gathering herbs unique to this place or serve travelers who come to see the famous lake atop Mount Guanamar.”

“Yes, that’s why I pretended to be a mercenary here to see the lake and rented this house. Wandering around daily didn’t arouse much suspicion. People say this time of the year is the most beautiful.”

“Hmm, winter being the peak season… That raises a peculiar point.”

Kishiar looked at Nathan Zuckerman and Yuder as if he expected they had already realized this. Yuder recalled the information about the village that Kishiar had shared with him earlier.

“A few years ago, some relatives of the Diarca Duchy came here to spend the summer, you said.”

“Yes.”

“If it was for sightseeing, they should have come in the early winter like now, and if it was to spend the leisure summer, there would have been many other better places than here, so Im curious as to why they came.”

“Exactly.”

Kishiar’s eyes lit up, signaling he had found the right answer.

“I also found that suspicious and asked the villagers. Loosening their guard over drinks, many remembered them for that reason.”

Nathan Zuckerman continued quietly.

“According to the villagers, they came to spend the summer but didnt seem to enjoy the surroundings much. They returned earlier than planned after a few days of touring with guides. One guide who

went down to the village at the mountain’s base is due back today, so I plan to meet her.”

“Hmm.”

Kishiar’s eyes sparkled with cool interest.

“Indeed suspicious. Good. Did you also find out more about the Crown Prince refining poison mushrooms here?”

“Yes. Actually, that’s the most important part I wanted to discuss.”

Before continuing, Nathan Zuckerman glanced around cautiously. Despite being a swordmaster with superior senses, his vigilance showed his well-trained discipline as a knight. Yuder, having once led numerous members, highly regarded Nathan’s caution.

“I decided a direct approach wouldn’t be wise to uncover that matter. So, I hinted to the local herbalists about wanting to buy herbs that could be gathered around that time, asking indirectly about events during that period.”

“A wise approach. So, what happened then?”

“A villager had died.”

Nathan Zuckerman replied with an expressionless face.

“One herbalist went out to gather herbs and was found brutally murdered in the mountains. It was right before the harvest festival. Soldiers sent by the lord concluded he was killed by a beast, but the villagers seemed to think otherwise.”

“They suspected murder?”

“Yes.”

According to Nathan, the unfortunate herbalist who died around the harvest time was a young man born and raised in the village. He was cheerful and well-regarded among the villagers, with no known personal grudges.

“This Mount Guanamar doesnt have beasts dangerous enough to harm people. There were no similar incidents before or after the herbalist’s death.”

If it were a dangerous place, nobles wouldn’t come to see the lake. Most nobles Yuder knew always frequented only the safest and most comfortable places.

“The villagers mentioned that before his death, the herbalist frequently went down the mountain to meet someone. He said it was a merchant to sell herbs to, but no one in the village had ever seen this merchant.”

“A mysterious herb merchant who’s never been seen and a murdered herbalist.”

There was a highly suspicious air about it. Everyone was likely thinking the same thing.

“I assumed the merchant’s identity might be linked to the servant the Crown Prince had sent to the village and tried to dig deeper, but those I met knew nothing about it. However, someone suggested the deceased’s family might know.”

“Have you met his family?”

Yuder asked. Nathan Zuckerman shook his head.

“That person is the same one I mentioned earlier, who had guided the Diarca relatives. That’s why I haven’t met her yet.”

“She was supposed to return today, wasnt she?”

Kishiar interjected.

“Yes.”

“That’s fortunate. We should join you when you meet her.”

Yuder recalled the blood-stained Dudureli mushroom sack he brought from the cabin. It was well-packed and stored in his baggage.

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Chapter 630

A dead herbalist. And the blood-stained mushroom bag we found

The feeling came. Finally, a strong sensation of having found the owner of that mushroom bag.

“Sir Zuckerman, may I ask you something?”

“Yes, I will answer if I know the information.”

“Do you know where the supposedly dead herbalist was found?”

Nathan Zuckerman’s eyes narrowed slightly upon hearing Yuder’s question. It was not out of ignorance, but rather a reaction of someone who grasped the implication hidden in the question.

“It seems you have a guess…”

“I do, but I will tell you after hearing your answer. Is the place near the cabin where I stayed?”

Yuder waited for the knight’s response.

After a moment, Nathan Zuckerman slowly nodded his head.

“Yes, the dead herbalist was found right in front of the resting place of the herbalists where you two stayed.”

Just as thought.

A sharp thrill ran down his spine, confirming his suspicions.

“Since then, the village’s herbalists rarely go there. Even the children in the village are forbidden from playing in that direction.”

“No wonder. I thought you, Nathan, were using some mysterious means to keep people away during our stay, but it seems that was not the case.”

Kishiar joked with a smile, but his eyes, unlike his lips, were serious and focused on Yuder. He clearly shared Yuder’s thoughts.

The existence of the herbalist’s resting place meant there were enough active herbalists to need such a place. However, no one had disturbed them during Yuder’s heat period. Yuder, preoccupied and not venturing outside, hadn’t felt this oddity, but Kishiar must have.

‘To think there was such a secret behind no one approaching the cabin.’

The feeling was similar to when he found the blood-stained bag. The shadow of death, which Crown Prince Katchian tried to bury forever, was still present there.

“Now, please tell me. Why is the location where the dead herbalist was found important?”

Yuder searched his bag and showed Nathan Zuckerman the blood-stained bag.

“This is something I found among the junk while staying there.”

As soon as he took a look at the outside of the bag and the inside containing the Dudureli mushrooms, he immediately realized what it meant.

“This is…”

“What are the chances that the person who left this behind is not the dead herbalist?”

Yuder was confident that the dead herbalist was indeed the owner of the blood-stained bag. Given that the herbalist had met a strange merchant, likely a servant sent by the Crown Prince, he now knew exactly what to ask the herbalist's family.

"Now, we can only hope that this family has enough information to satisfy our queries."

Kishiar looked out the window with a chilly smile.

—

"Marin! Have you just returned?"

A person entering the village stopped at the call of an elderly man. From under a deeply worn hat, a weary and harsh voice responded.

"Yes."

"Tsk tsk. You seem even thinner than before you left. If you haven't eaten yet, why don't you come over to my house? Syll and Reimi would be glad to see you."

Observing the old man's expression filled with sorrowful sympathy, the person known as Marin pressed her lips together tightly for a moment. She soon shook her head, indicating her refusal.

"No, thank you for your offer, but I'm fine. I've just returned and am tired, so I plan to go straight home."

"Well, then, there's nothing I can do. Oh, but there are visitors at your house right now."

"Visitors? I'm not expecting anyone."

“They’re mercenary travelers. They’re looking for dried Perdy grass, and I thought you might have some extra at your house. Before your brother Mikey passed away, he had collected quite a lot of it. Since he left so suddenly, I thought you might still have some not yet disposed of…”

At the mention of her deceased brother’s name, deep pain welled up in Marin’s eyes.

She half-listened to the old man’s next words before turning away to walk to her house.

The herbs her brother had gathered before his death were indeed still at the house. However, she had no desire to pass them on to anyone else.

‘Whoever that person is… if they are really waiting, I’ll just have to reject them right away.’

Before long, Marin spotted three tall shadows standing in front of her dilapidated house. Each one was armed with a sword, unmistakably mercenaries. She had thought the old man referred to a single mercenary, but it seemed there were more in the group.

Two of the three had somewhat vague appearances, but Marin didn’t find this particularly strange. Since her brother’s death, she had lost much of her interest in others.

She also failed to notice that one man with black hair and a pale face had been staring at her with a hint of discovery since the first moment he saw her face.

“The homeowner has finally returned.”

The tallest of the men stepped forward, unfolding his arms. He had ordinary brown hair and eyes, an unremarkable appearance, yet

his smiling face had a warm charm. His confident smile, as if he was used to charming people, only made Marin more wary.

“You have extra Perdy grass in this house, right?”

“I don’t know. Even if I do, I’m not planning to give it away, so please leave.”

“Hmm. You seem very tired. Then, if I visit again tomorrow, can we talk…”

“Not tomorrow, not ever. I told you not to come back.”

Marin turned to enter her house, but another voice from behind stopped her.

“You, you’re an Awakener.”

Her hand, reaching to push the door, froze in mid-air. Slowly, Marin turned her head to look at the man who had spoken. The man with black hair looked at her with inscrutable, deep black eyes and spoke again.

“The ability to grow thorny bushes. That’s right, isn’t it?”

“What are you people?”

Marin quickly stepped back. Her eyes flickered anxiously between the three men. Cold sweat formed on the back of her neck, but she did not show her emotion and tightly gripped the dagger at her waist.

She had no confidence in facing three robust mercenaries alone, but she wouldn’t die in vain if it came to that. Using her ability and the dagger together…

“Well, I understand you’re startled, but there’s no need to be so defensive. It seems better to just get to the point.”

The man with black hair exchanged a meaningful look with the tall brown-haired man, who still had a smile on his face as he spoke.

“Like me, I am also an Awakener, so I can recognize another Awakener. The grass is just an excuse; we are actually looking for information about someone who tried to take processed Dudureli mushrooms from this village a few months ago.”

“Processed Dudureli mushrooms?”

Marin reacted immediately to the mention of the mushrooms. Her grip on the dagger’s handle unexpectedly loosens. The brown-haired man, quickly noticing this, nods with a benign and harmless smile.

“Yes, and according to what we’ve gathered so far, it seems likely that your brother was unfortunately involved in this. Would you mind having a brief talk about it? It will only take a moment,” he proposes, adding, “Of course, only if you’re interested in the ‘truth’.”

This addition by the man stirs something in Marin. Eventually, she opens her clenched lips to speak in a dry voice, “If you seek to know what happened to Mikey, anyone is welcome. Please, come in.”

Entering a cold, dilapidated house that seemed uninhabited for months, Yuder intently observes Marin lighting a lantern.

“I never expected to encounter the ‘Thornbush Marin’ here,” Yuder muses to himself.

In his past life, he had met her. It wasn’t a pleasant acquaintance.

Known as ‘Thornbush Marin’, she was an Awakener mercenary who could rapidly grow various dangerous plants and trees, including thornbushes laced with poison.

During a time when Emperor Katchian was tightening his grip on the four dukedoms, including the Diarca, to strengthen his authority,

she was hired to assassinate the Emperor at an external event. However, her attempt was thwarted by Yuder. Impressively, she managed to escape through the encirclement of the Cavalry, leaving a deep impression on Yuder.

Years later, she reappeared at a place later called the Red Field. As one of the key figures opposing the Emperor's tyranny, her name became even more notorious for a terrifying combat style involving poison-laden thornbushes that grew through people's bodies.

Eventually, she fell to a joint operation of knights sent by Emperor Katchian, the imperial army, and the Cavalry, disappearing from history.

Yuder couldn't fail to recognize the intense face of that Awakener.

It was astonishing to meet Thornbush Marin here in such a vulnerable state, having been someone whose hometown and identity remained a mystery to everyone in his previous life.

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Chapter 631

“Refined Dudureli mushrooms… I don’t know how much you know or how far you’ve come, but yes. It was indeed those mushrooms that my younger brother Mikey was last gathering.”

Marin slumped wearily into an old chair. As she removed her pressed-down hat, her coarse black hair cascaded over her shoulders. She continued speaking, leaving her tousled hair as it was.

“And I did think that if someone were to kill Mikey, it would most likely be the unfamiliar merchant he had met before his death. After Mikey’s death, I scoured the village below the mountain to find this person, but to no avail.”

“The lord said that Mikey was killed by a beast.”

“You’ve heard that too? Ha. Right. Such a shitty story.”

Anger flickered in Marin’s eyes.

“Anyone could see he was stabbed to death, but they made up a story about a monster to pretend to hunt it down. They brushed it off simply because it was bothersome. With such nonsense passed off as the investigation’s result, Mikey couldn’t rest in peace even in death!”

As Yuder witnessed the flame of hatred rising in her tired face, he reaffirmed that this bramble-covered Marin was indeed the one he remembered.

“So, what do you know about this merchant?”

Kishiar asked calmly and softly. After a moment of silence, Marin muttered with bloodshot eyes.

“Not much.”

“Not much?”

“As infuriating as it is… I had been outside the village since a few days before Mikey’s death. I only learned that he was meeting with a stranger after he died.”

After hearing of her brother’s death, Marin hurried back to the village and exhausted all her efforts to find the culprit. However, the most likely suspect had already vanished, and the lord only offered a conclusion that it was the act of a beast, showing little initiative. For him, the death of an ordinary villager in a small hamlet was of little concern, but the neglect was excessive.

The villagers mourned Mikey’s unfortunate accident, but some whispered that he had suffered for trying to sell something bad. Even though they grew up in the same village and knew better. Baseless rumors about Mikey being cursed also circulated, and people avoided the place where his body was found, fearing a similar fate.

With no leads on the culprit and nowhere to turn, Marin grew rapidly weary and wandered aimlessly. The realization that there was nothing more she could do was truly powerless.

Even today, before returning to the village, she had been helping others at the foot of the mountain, trying to find a way to clear her brother’s name. But she failed again and returned, shattered.

“Mikey wasn’t like that. He wasn’t the type to take risks selling something out of greed, whether for money or anything else.”

“Then let’s change the question.”

The man with brown hair, looking steadily into Marin's bloodshot eyes, changed his question.

"Before your brother died, when he was gathering Dudureli mushrooms, didn't you find anything strange? Even if you didn't see the merchant yourself, your brother must have had a few contacts for the trade. Any memories from around that time would be helpful."

"…"

Marin, frowning in silence, bit her lip and struggled to continue speaking.

"Mikey was not the type to often talk about whom he was meeting or trading with… I don't remember much about that. But… I do recall wondering why he was picking and drying mushrooms that wouldn't even sell for much money."

Dudureli mushrooms were weakly poisonous mushrooms sometimes used by poor commoners. Although not particularly difficult to find, they were not valuable and hardly sold for money. Even herb shops, which dealt with a variety of herbs, often refused to purchase them, as they were considered worthless.

As he suddenly started collecting and drying a lot of them, she had asked him whom he was planning to give them to when she passed by, not thinking that he intended to sell them.

"And what did he answer?"

"He just smiled awkwardly. He didnt give any answer."

Mikey had a fondness for flowers and grass. Observing seemingly useless grasses had been his hobby since childhood. So Marin had assumed that this was just another part of his hobby.

"Ah. Now that I think about it, he did say something else."

A faint memory suddenly surfaced in her torn heart.

“Mikey said… that an old friend had contacted him after a long time and that he might meet them soon. I didnt respond, thinking it was nonsense, and soon left home…”

Yes. He had said that, but it was such an everyday conversation that she had forgotten it. As Marin’s expression distorted, the man with brown hair asked again.

“Did your brother have many friends?”

“Not many, but… he was pretty much friends with all the kids who grew up in this village. Now, many of them have gone down to the towns below the mountain or to big cities like Tainu for work. There arent many left in the village, just a few who gather herbs like the adults or cater to tourists.”

“Then you must have thought he planned to meet one of those friends.”

“I did.”

“If they had made plans to meet, did any of them contact you after your brother’s death?”

“No.”

“Is it possible your brother had a friend you didnt know about?”

“No.”

“Are you sure?”

Marin nodded without hesitation.

“I’m sure.”

The man with brown hair stared intently at Marin, as if he could discern any falsehood in her words just by looking.

He was said to be an Awakener too.

Could he have the ability to discern truth from lies? His eyes, usually vague, felt very heavy and sharp in that moment, but Marin did not shrink in front of this strange intimidation. She was too weary to be frightened by anything.

After a while, the man with brown hair turned his gaze to the others. They exchanged opinions with just a look, then suddenly asked a completely different question.

“Theres actually one more thing we wanted to ask you.”

“What is it?”

“Do you remember… a few years ago, when nobles came to spend the summer in this village? I heard that you guided them.”

“Summer… I remember. Why?”

It was rare for people to come to see the lake in summer. The water level of the lake at the top of the mountain would drop significantly under the hot sun, making the surroundings terribly humid. Marin thought it was as good as liking to be whipped, choosing to enjoy an environment far from coolness in already hot weather. It was a truly unique experience, and so were the events that followed, so of course, she remembered.

As Marin recalled the nobles who had visited back then, a significant and secretive incident from that time suddenly came to mind.

‘The fact that these people, who are looking for the one who traded Dudureli mushrooms, are now suddenly asking about the

nobles who visited… Does it mean there's a connection? Then… wait a minute. Could it be?'

Marin's expression changed drastically. Yuder, too, was closely observing her face, which she couldn't hide.

'That's not the face of someone who just guided them. There must have been something more.'

"You're not just asking this out of curiosity, are you? What is it? Why such questions……"

Marin, leaning her hands on the table, suddenly stood up. However, Kishiar and Nathan Zuckerman, who had temporarily changed their appearances with magic, along with Yuder, all remained seated without any sign of disturbance.

"Yes, we're not just asking. We believe that one of the nobles who visited this village a few years ago is connected to your brother's recent death. In fact, we suspect that person is responsible for killing your brother."

The man with brown hair, Kishiar, lifted the corners of his lips with his transformed face.

"So, your answer here is very important. Our guess as to why the deceased was collecting and preparing worthless mushrooms and meeting with merchants will depend on your response."

"…"

"Didn't you say you wanted the truth? So do we. I won't presume to understand the feelings of someone who lost a brother overnight, but I promise to make the person who did this pay. That's why we're here."

"…"

“As of now, you’re the only person who can give us an answer.”

After looking at them for a long time, Marin finally collapsed back into her seat. Her lips, buried between her hands, let out heavy, restrained breaths.

Kishiar patiently waited a long time for her to speak.

And finally, a locked voice flowed from Marin.

“Exactly, it was the summer five years ago. The time when those nobles visited. The incident that happened then, the ‘old friend’ Mikey mentioned meeting after a long time… and the Dudureli mushrooms. I know one person who could connect all three.”

“Who is that?”

“Katchian. He was a friend of Mikey’s.”

Suddenly, Yuder felt a lightning-like sensation rushing down his spine.

Putting together the information heard along the way, he had speculated that Katchian must be connected to this village. But the truth was always more surprising.

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Chapter 632

In the village, the child was known as ‘Little Kitchi.’ Much smaller and weaker than his peers, frequent illnesses had sharpened his temperament, making it hard for him to blend in with other children. However, he often played with Mikey, finding solace in his company.

According to Marin’s recollection, ‘Little Kitchi’ was a child brought back to the village by a resident who worked far away. He had no mother from the start, only a father, a situation not unusual in the village, so people didn’t question it much.

Marin remembered ‘Little Kitchi’ as the neighbor’s child who, like a boss, led his bigger and taller younger brother around, roaming the hills. Despite his size, Mikey, known for his good nature, always played happily with Kitchi, regardless of the circumstances.

Thanks to this, ‘Little Kitchi,’ usually as tight-lipped as a clam in front of others, gradually opened up to Mikey, sharing his secretive stories.

“Sister, to dye hair black, should I use Kubal grass instead of Nubil grass?”

“Yes, but why ask? Dyeing herbs are harsh, and kids shouldnt touch them.”

“I’m not dyeing my hair. But Kitchi said there’s a cheaper herb for dyeing than buying dye, and I got curious.”

“The neighbor kid? Wasn’t his hair always black?”

“Ah…”

Startled, the younger brother glanced around nervously. Marin, playfully pressing him for information, learned that the neighbor's black hair was the result of diligent monthly dyeing, a fact unknown to anyone else in the village.

"Dont tell anyone what I said, sister. If Kitchi finds out, he'll be mad."

"How silly. Why be scared of one little bratty kid getting angry?"

"Oh, sister…"

Amused by her brother's flustered demeanor, Marin decided to keep the newfound secret to herself.

"Enough with the herbs and stop teaching the neighbor kid useless things. Remember the trouble you caused with the Dudureli mushrooms? If it happens again, both of you are in trouble."

"But… Alright. I'll be quiet."

Over time, Marin learned more about the boy next door.

Little Kitchi, it turned out, originally had golden hair, and his mother was still alive. A remarkable woman, too busy to care for her child, had entrusted him to his father.

As Mikey realized his sister kept his secrets, he occasionally shared stories about his friend. To Marin, five years their senior, these tales seemed frivolous and fanciful.

"Kitchi says when he's grown, his mother from the East will come to get him. Isn't that amazing?"

"Sure, very impressive."

"His real name isn't Little Kitchi, you know. That's just a nickname from his father. Kitchi doesnt like it; he prefers the name his mother

gave him.”

“Well, having ‘Little Kitchi’ as a name is a bit odd. It means ‘little bird,’ right? So, what’s the great kid’s real name?”

“Katchian.”

“Hmm.”

Marin, quick-witted since childhood and skilled at catering to tourists, knew more than most her age.

If these grandiose claims were true, she concluded there was only one possibility.

The bratty neighbor kid was likely of noble blood. But not all those of noble blood were necessarily noble in stature.

If the boy truly were of noble birth, his father wouldn’t have come to this remote mountain village to struggle alone raising him. The monthly hair dyeing must have been to conceal the boy’s lineage, for it was said that true nobles could be recognized by their hair and eye color. Little Kitchi’s eyes, black but appearing red in bright light, already made him stand out.

The boy seemed to genuinely believe that his mother would one day come to take him away from this impoverished village. But could such a thing really happen?

“He’s probably clinging to that belief to feel like he’s noble. Let’s leave him be. When he grows up, he’ll understand the value of his life and keep quiet.”

Marin had thought so and paid it no further mind.

The memory resurfaced years later when unfamiliar nobles visited the village to spend the summer.

“These people were different from the start. While I guided them, they showed little interest in anything but the villagers, especially the children.”

It seemed they found young Marin easier to deal with than adults, bombarding her with questions. Quickly sensing their motives, Marin played the fool, feigning forgetfulness each time they handed her money. Appearing thrilled with a few silver coins, she groveled, and the nobles let down their guard.

“We’re curious. Is there a blond-haired child in this village? Even a passing glimpse would be helpful.”

Based on their subtle inquiries, Marin quickly pieced together their objective.

They were searching for a blond boy not born in this village. Though they didnt elaborate, it was clear they didnt intend to treat the boy as a mere plaything.

Pretending not to understand their conversations, Marin caught a few key words. A noble was searching for a lost young boy, planning to adopt him if found. They were certain the boy would have blond hair…

Nobility. Blond hair. Lost child. Adoption.

Then, Marin remembered a story her brother had told her long ago. It seemed unlikely, but if Little Kitchi was the one they were seeking, it would be nothing short of the miracle he had hoped for.

Marin wrestled with whether to inform Kitchi. Eventually, realizing the choice wasn’t hers to make, she casually mentioned it to her brother Mikey.

If Mikey relayed the message correctly, Little Kitchi would soon realize the visiting nobles might be looking for him.

Days passed.

The nobles, who had planned to stay until summer's end, suddenly packed up and left. They departed with satisfied smiles, and behind them stood Little Kitchi, newly employed as their errand boy. They praised his appearance and manners, announcing plans to take him for further training.

Kitchi, despite his temper, was undeniably handsome, so everyone accepted their explanation. Though still young, he had landed a position in a fine place it seemed his fortune had turned.

However, Marin remembered the muffled arguments from the neighboring house over the past few days. On the day the boy's father, who had raised him so preciously, saw his son leave with the nobles, he didnt even come out to bid farewell.

Despite the situation, the boy's expression showed no sign of disappointment or regret. With firmly pressed red lips and squared shoulders, he ignored Mikey, who came running late with a flower for him, and descended the mountain without a backward glance.

"Kitchi! Kitchi! Wait!"

…

"Kitchi!"

The way he acted, as if he couldn't wait to leave this place, was cold and cruel, especially after having spent so long there.

Thus, Kitchi left the village. His father, left to live alone, soon moved down the mountain, where he drowned his sorrows in alcohol every day until he disappeared. People thought he went to meet his son. Marin thought so too.

As time passed, the villagers soon forgot about Little Kitchi and his father.

Marin, having lost both parents to illness, now solely responsible for her younger brother, also ceased to actively recall them. That was, until this very moment.

…

After Marin finished her brief narrative, a cold silence filled the small house. Still covering her face with her hands, she continued speaking.

“Mikey always enjoyed identifying the properties of insignificant herbs and mushrooms. Kitchi… Katchian, preferred to play tricks with them. I remember when they were young, they ground up Dudureli mushrooms and mixed it into the village’s communal water supply as a prank. It almost caused serious harm to an elderly man. It was a dangerously reckless incident.”

The mushroom wasn’t originally that potent, but Mikey had discovered a more advanced way of processing it beyond its traditional use. This incident had caught the attention of the village herbalists, leading Mikey into a life of herbalism, a memory that Marin still retained.

“I thought Katchian had become the adopted son of some noble family, never to contact us again. But if he had ever reached out to Mikey, wanting Dudureli mushrooms refined like they did back then… Mikey would definitely have helped him.”

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Chapter 633

“I thought Katchian had become the adopted son of some noble family, never to contact us again. But if he had ever reached out to Mikey, wanting Dudureli mushrooms refined like they did back then… Mikey would definitely have helped him.”

Her story carried no hint of falsehood. Even considering her past life’s memories, this was evident. In her previous existence, the unexplained events and mysteries surrounding her life only became clear after hearing this tale. Likely, after losing her brother, Marin had left the village to start a life as a mercenary.

She must have learned of Emperor Katchians identity later on.

Perhaps she hadn’t known his true identity until she came to assassinate the Emperor who had left the palace for a sojourn. It was common for commoners not to know the names of royalty or nobility. To them, the Emperor was just the Emperor, a distant figure whose name held no significance in their everyday lives.

Marin, seen through the eyes of Yuder in the thorny bushes, seemed too quick to abandon her attempt at assassinating the Emperor, almost as if she was fleeing. Considering her later displayed hatred and persistence towards the Emperor, her quick surrender at that time was somewhat questionable. If Marin had recognized Katchian in that moment, her retreat in confusion would have made sense.

She would have then started seeking revenge, certain about who had killed her brother. Although that journey ended in tragic downfall, what about this life?

She must avoid the same fate as in her last life.

Yuder resolved to help her avoid walking the same path. His decision stemmed from more than just sympathy. Having deviated from his previous life's path, he wanted to offer her the same chance.

Speaking of which, her brother was a loss. He would have been a valuable asset if discovered earlier, not just for her but for others too.

In his previous life, Katchian had carried out numerous assassinations using the thirst-inducing Dudureli mushrooms combined with other poisons. Using a weak poison first, followed by a stronger secondary poison that the victim would ingest themselves, was a cunning strategy. It allowed him to remain bold amidst numerous suspicions and doubts. Many nobles feared being poisoned in such a manner, recognizing the Emperor as not just a young ruler but a cold, ruthless strategist. Essentially, this poison had been a significant factor in Emperor Katchian reasserting his political power.

The new method of refining a seemingly worthless mushroom.

The intricate combination of two different poisons, a knowledge not easily conceived by anyone but an expert in poisons and plants.

If indeed Marin's brother had discovered all this, he would have been recognized as a remarkable talent. He was not meant to be just a village herbalist. Had he been alive, Yuder would have immediately taken him to Enon.

Everyone thought it was Emperor Katchians knowledge, but it was actually this?

Recalling the bloodstained Dudureli mushroom sack he had found brought a bitter taste to his mouth.

"Honestly, as I spoke, I hoped you would say it wasn't him. But seeing your reactions, it seems I wasn't mistaken."

After hearing everything about Katchian, Marin muttered to the three unshaken listeners.

“The man who killed my brother. It’s really him, isn’t it?”

“Yes.”

Kishiar answered calmly. At the same time, flames seemed to ignite in Marin’s eyes.

“The merchant Mikey met, that was someone sent by him, wasn’t it? Where is he now? Are you following Katchian? Why? What brings you to this, and who are you?”

“Let’s answer one question at a time. But before that, you should know that knowing these answers might put your life in danger. We will protect you, but…”

“I don’t care about that. Do you think I fear death now? Just tell me!”

Marin slammed the table, causing a cup to topple and roll onto the floor, but Kishiar remained composed. He took a quiet breath, holding Marin’s gaze. Even a simple eye contact seemed to calm the raging emotions within Marin.

When she had settled enough to listen, Kishiar finally spoke.

“Katchian La Orr. That’s the name he bears now.”

“Katchian… La Orr? La Orr, as in… imperial family member?”

“Yes. Precisely, the current Crown Prince of the Orr Empire.”

“The Crown Prince? That little Kitchi, no, Katchian?”

“A few years ago, His Majesty the Emperor held tests for exceptional children from noble families to select an adopted heir. Do

you remember?”

Breathless and in disbelief, Marin finally nodded, a faint frown forming as she recalled.

“Yes. I think I remember… People who came to see the lake talked about it. They were betting on which noble’s child would win… But you’re saying Kitchi was that child?”

“He matched the age and description. Katchian left this village five years ago. The tests for the Crown Prince happened about a year after that. He represented the Diarca Ducal family, one of the largest powers in the East. His biological mother is known to be the daughter born from the second wife of the current Duke Diarca’s cousin.”

And coincidentally, as soon as it was certain that Katchian would win and be adopted by the Emperor, his biological mother died in an accident. His biological father had been out of the picture since he first entered high society under the Diarca familys name.

Even without parents, his lineage, a continuation of the Diarca bloodline, and his flawless physical traits made his adoption unproblematic.

“Those in the know probably thought Katchian’s parents were conveniently disposed of by the Diarca faction… But who would delve deeper?”

No one suspected there was more to Katchian La Orr’s background. It had always been so.

Kishiar didn’t elaborate further, but it was enough for Marin to recall ‘Katchian with a mother in the East.’

“A few months ago, at the end of the harvest festival, Crown Prince Katchian poisoned someone from another noble family at a

party. He used the Dudureli mushroom combined with another poison.”

“The Dudureli mushroom… Thats impossible… Around harvest time, thats when Mikey was killed…”

“Yes. All the circumstances fit together well.”

Marin’s eyes shook violently. Clenching her fists, she finally asked with a voice trembling with anger.

“So, was the poisoning revealed, and what happened after?”

“There was no punishment whatsoever.”

“What? He didn’t face any punishment for his crime?”

“Officially, the Crown Prince wasn’t the one who committed the crime.”

A cold smile flickered at the corners of Kishiar’s lips.

“The crime was pinned on a servant who had gone to procure the mushrooms on behalf of the Crown Prince, and the case was closed. However, we were curious why the Crown Prince specifically needed a little-known mushroom from a small village in the west, with which he had no apparent connection. That’s what brought us here.”

“So, you… Are you nobility too? Are you adversaries of Kitchi… the Crown Prince?”

Revealing his true identity in response could put Kishiar at risk. Yuder considered stepping in on his behalf but then decided against it, seeing the look in Kishiar’s eyes as he gazed at Marin.

Kishiar, with a look of earnest longing for the truth, quietly observed Marin, who was looking up at him intently. Then, slowly, he

moved his hand and rotated the bracelet that had been altering his appearance, deactivating the magic.

The magic that had blurred his face, hair, and eyes washed away, revealing his original golden hair, red eyes, and face.

He introduced himself properly to the wide-eyed Marin.

“I am Kishiar La Orr, the Commander of the Emperor’s Cavalry. I apologize for the late introduction.”

His manner of speaking, casual like that of an ordinary mercenary until now, transformed, regaining its inherent elegance.

A shiver, similar yet entirely different from the one Yuder felt when he first heard Katchian’s name from Marin, ran from his heart to the tips of his fingers and toes.

Marin, witnessing the same scene, emitted a breathless sound.

“The Cavalry… the one made up only of Awakeners?”

“Yes, you’re informed.”

Kishiar smiled and extended his hand towards her.

“We are currently touring the country for the second recruitment of the Cavalry members. If you think our goals align in the future, would you consider applying?”

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Chapter 634

“We are currently touring the country for the second recruitment of the Cavalry members. If you think our goals align in the future, would you consider applying?”

This proposal, unbeknownst to Marin, was exactly what Yuder had intended to offer. He had planned to approach her later, believing that enlisting Marin would be beneficial for the future of the Cavalry. However, Kishiar’s initiative rendered Yuder’s plan unnecessary.

It was clear that Kishiar had already completed his assessment and recognized her potential based on Yuder’s reaction, who already knew of Marin’s abilities.

‘Everything becomes simpler once it’s out in the open,’ Yuder thought to himself.

As he was thinking that, Kishiar, who caught his eye, grinned quietly. It was a look of satisfaction, aware that this was what Yuder had desired.

Unnoticed by himself, Yuder’s eyes softened slightly.

“Joining the Cavalry, you say… Well,” Marin pondered. Contrary to expectations of immediate refusal or anger, Marin did not dismiss the offer outright. She regained her composure quickly after the initial shock and studied Kishiar’s face thoughtfully before letting out a deep sigh.

“I’ve heard about the Cavalry’s remarkable feats in the west. Even in this remote area, those tales were the talk of the town.”

“Is that so?”

“But isn’t the Cavalry filled with exceptional warriors capable of defeating monsters as large as houses alone? I doubt I’d pass the test even if our goals align. Ive never… done anything like that in my life.”

Marin couldn’t have imagined that one of those ‘exceptional warriors’ was present among them. While Yuder remained silent, Kishiar let out a light-hearted laugh.

“Why are you laughing?” Marin asked, puzzled.

“No reason. I’m just glad you’re not completely opposed to joining. My proposal wasn’t based solely on shared goals. I believe you have the qualities befitting the Cavalry,” Kishiar explained.

“Me?” Marin was understandably surprised, not grasping the reason behind Kishiar’s confidence.

“I wont say I’m helpless in a fight. I help out the mercenaries in the neighboring village occasionally. But as for my awakened abilities… they’re just enough to sprout a blade of grass. Hardly useful against even the smallest monster.”

“Do you really think so?”

“Are you suggesting otherwise? You haven’t even seen my abilities.”

Kishiar’s lips curved into a meaningful smile.

“Not having seen doesn’t mean I dont know. If you doubt my judgment, the very person who recently defeated a monster alone in the west is here. Why not discuss your potential and possibilities with him?”

“Really?”

“The ability to discern an Awakener’s potential and the skill to teach are, frankly, even greater in this person than in me as the Commander.”

With these grand words, Kishiar’s face broke into a wide grin as he gestured towards his associate.

“Allow me to introduce my assistant, Sir Yuder Aile. A leading figure in the Cavalry, recently praised for single-handedly defeating a giant monster and granted the title of Baron.”

Marin’s eyes widened with a different kind of surprise from when she first saw Kishiar’s true form.

‘…That person?’

Beside the strikingly handsome man, a pale and somber-looking man had been sitting quietly, who didnt resemble the incredible Awakener of the rumors. People often speculated that to defeat a giant monster alone, one must possess immense size and strength, but Yuder Aile was a stark contrast to such vague imaginations.

Though tall, he was not a man of bursting muscles. His expressionless face radiated not the arrogance of the strong, but a tranquility akin to the chill of dawn. It was almost doubtful whether he was capable of real emotion.

That this man, of commoner origins and now adorned with a last name, had made his name known across the continent was remarkable.

‘But it was he who recognized my abilities without even seeing them. What kind of power does he possess?’

Marin looked at Yuder with a mix of curiosity and caution, to which Yuder responded quietly.

“There’s no need to overthink. Probably, you’re the only one who underestimates your abilities.”

What? As Marin questioned her ears, his toneless voice continued.

“If you’re refusing because you don’t want to join the Cavalry, that’s one thing. But there’s no need to be scared thinking you lack the ability. With your power, you wouldnt easily lose, be it in the Cavalry or elsewhere.”

“Didnt you hear what I said? I can only sprout a blade of grass.”

“Even grass has its own worth.”

His slightly slower speech somehow made his words more impactful, as if they were etching into her mind.

“There are many plants in the world. Some are tough and hard to cut, others are so poisonous that a mere touch can be lethal. Your brother knew well that plants are not always fragile.”

Marins fingers twitched on the table.

“But I’ve never grown anything that remarkable.”

“Never having tried and being unable to are different things.”

His eyes, dark as the night, seemed to peer into Marins soul. She found herself drawn into his words.

“Your power depends on how well you know plants. And you had a brother who knew them well. That’s an ideal condition to develop your ability. I assure you, if you join the Cavalry and endure a year, you could win against most of the members in a duel.”

It sounded unbelievable, but part of her wanted to believe.

Until now, she had considered her power useless, especially since her awakening followed her brother's death. Marin had never revealed her awakening to anyone in the village. She considered it an unlucky ability she wished to hide forever.

But if what he said was true…

"Really? You're not just saying this to persuade me?"

"Why would I lie in this situation?"

True. To Marin, this opportunity was significant, but to him, she was just one of many ordinary Awakeners, not worth the effort of deceit.

Yet, Marin felt that he genuinely wanted to convince her. It was hard to believe, but it seemed true.

Her eyes, sharpened by years of catering to various guests, flickered in confusion.

"Alright, I understand. But may I take some more time to think about it? It feels too hasty to decide right now," Marin said with hesitation.

"There's no rush," Kishiar replied with a gentle smile, watching her thoughtfully.

He reassured Marin that she could take her time to think, and then, on the spot, he wrote a note bearing his signature. It was a token that any member of the Cavalry would recognize as Kishiar's.

"If you make up your mind, take this to the Cavalry's Western Branch in Tainu. Show it to Branch Head Emun Philang, and he will assist you with whatever you need."

Marin slowly nodded and accepted the note.

Yuder, observing Marin as she carefully examined the note, presented her with one last item.

“Oh, this is…”

“This helped us on our journey here. I believe it belongs to Mikey,” Yuder explained, handing her a blood-stained mushroom sack.

Marin closed her eyes tightly as she recognized the old, discolored blood on the otherwise worn and ordinary sack. It was a family’s intuition to recognize a belonging. For her, it was no different.

“Yes, it’s Mikey’s. I thought it had been discarded somewhere in the mountains since I couldn’t find it when I arrived… Where did you find this?”

“We found it at a herbalist’s rest stop.”

The realization that her brother’s last traces were so close twisted Marin’s brow, but instead of succumbing to anger like before, she gripped the sack tightly, holding back the surge of emotions.

Yuder sensed that this composed demeanor was more akin to her true self, a reflection of her life here.

“This sack could serve as evidence of the Crown Prince’s deeds, so we need to take it with us. But we thought it right to show it to you first.”

“If you hadn’t planned to take it, I would have insisted you do,” Marin said firmly, handing the sack back to Yuder.

“I’ll visit the place you mentioned when I can. I have things to settle and finish up here, so I can’t leave right away.”

Yuder, along with Kishiar and Nathan Zuckerman, then left Marin's house. Marin had informed them of the location where little Kitchi had lived, but they found it had long since become a ruined, empty house.

Like their arrival, they departed the village quietly.

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Chapter 635

Amidst the journey to trace the footsteps of Prince Katchian, an unexpected yet significant discovery was made.

During the brief interval when Nathan Zuckerman was away, Yuder succinctly relayed to Kishiar the tale of ‘Thornbush Marin.’ Kishiar showed more interest in the Red Field Riot, where Marin last fought and fell, than in the fact that she had attempted to assassinate the Emperor of Katchian.

“It seems there was considerable dissatisfaction with the ‘Emperor’s Decree’ at that time. Did such incidents continue afterward?”

“No. That was the most significant uprising, and afterward, stricter regulations and numerous disasters prevented any large-scale events from occurring again.”

The Red Field Riot was an uprising initiated by the destitute of the western regions, devastated by the colossal Pethuamet and monster hordes, and the southern imperial citizens struggling with illegal fighting rings and rampant drug problems. They swelled in number, protesting against the Emperor and nobility for failing to address these issues properly.

As their numbers grew, control became impossible. Like Marin, who had solely targeted the Emperor, others with varied motives joined, leading to a forceful suppression by the Empire’s entire military might.

Yuder reflected anew on this event, one of the charges for his execution.

His involvement in the Red Field Riot was highlighted not for any other reason but because his Cavalry showed remarkable efficiency in the aftermath, unlike other groups. They eschewed unnecessary torture, using Awakeners adept at information gathering to determine the severity of crimes. Those found innocent or unwittingly involved were even released. Yuder's political opponents accused him of colluding with the rioters, trusting in the 'power of ability' to justify their release.

Of course, this was nothing but baseless slander, known even to the accusers. Although the controversy subsided with the Katchian Emperor's support for Yuder, this event remained a line in his long list of alleged crimes.

"Anyway… the suppression was effective. People never dared to oppose the Emperor again and became completely silent."

As disasters worsened, people prioritized survival over expressing dissent, even if it meant groveling to the nobles for safety.

"And after that, Emperor Katchian…"

Following a period of seclusion, he emerged more actively engaged in foreign relations and showcasing his abilities. Especially with the southern tribe that aided in quelling the Red Field Riot, his interactions increased. This was also when he first showed interest in the so-called false sage.

Perhaps it was then that he began to excessively guard against Yuder, his once most trusted subordinate.

Consequently, Yuder naturally found himself spending more time away from the Cavalry, exploring other areas. If not for this shift, his interest in the recurring disasters might have been delayed. Though seemingly unchanged, much had indeed transformed because of this event.

“Ah… I see, I understand now,” Kishiar nodded after hearing everything.

“If the main trouble areas are the west and south, the west shouldn’t be a concern anymore, leaving the south as the key focus. You’ve been particularly interested in the southern merchants and illegal fighting rings, was that the reason?”

“Yes… Well, something like that.”

As Yuder responded, he pondered anew on the dubious identities of the southern merchants.

In his previous life, his focus had been on disaster preparedness and maintaining the Cavalry, paying little heed to foreign diplomacy or politics. This was due to widespread wariness of his interest in such matters and the Emperor’s preference for Yuder not to exceed his assigned duties.

However, upon reflection, the southern tribes had opportunistically gained from the Red Field Riot, making one wonder if their involvement was without ulterior motives.

Though the answer remained elusive, Yuder felt it was unlikely to be so straightforward.

Kishiar’s lips curved up gently.

“Do not worry. Like in the west, it will go well this time too. The name ‘Red Field’ will not arise again.”

Yuder remained silent, reflecting on the origin of that name: the last battlefield, drenched in blood and red thorny bushes, had turned entirely crimson.

That field, since losing its original name, became known only as the ‘Red Field,’ a place too dangerous for anyone to tread.

Even without mentioning these details, Kishiar always seemed to touch upon the deepest, unspoken parts of Yuder's psyche. His words calmed the turbulent emotions in Yuder's heart, bringing a sense of profound peace.

'Yes. With you here, it will be different this time.'

Yuder nodded almost imperceptibly. Kishiar moved closer, smiling, and Yuder accepted the embrace without resistance.

The contact, their first since the end of the heat period, felt different, natural yet more intense. It evoked in Yuder an indescribable longing, alongside the confirmation that his mating season had indeed ended.

Despite Kishiar's presence and closeness, Yuder yearned for more, a thirst unsatisfied by mere sight.

Kishiar's red eyes seemed to share the sentiment.

"The journey to the village bearing traces of the First Duke of Tain, our next destination, will take another day at this pace. Are you not tired?"

"No, I'm fine. But what about you, Commander?"

"I'm perfectly well… but I'm pleased you're concerned."

Kishiar leaned against Yuder's shoulder, nuzzling affectionately, resembling Nipollen, the cat usually curled up on the Cavalry headquarters' staircase.

'He may be much larger than a cat…'

Amused by the thought, Yuder's eyes softened. As he ran his fingers through Kishiar's golden hair, Kishiar adjusted to make it easier for Yuder to stroke him.

Though such behavior was unbecoming of a Duke of imperial lineage, Yuder said nothing, letting his fingers glide through the soft locks. The lingering heat from the past few days seemed to recede slowly from deep within him.

They remained seated together until just before Nathan Zuckerman's return.

—

"Nahan, what will we do now?"

In the seventh wall district of the capital, the poorest and most dangerous quarter, Nahan and several Awakeners gathered. Each of their faces bore an expression of unease.

If the sage had indeed decided to assist the Cavalry, then the actions you and your brothers have taken up to now become unforgivable. We can't return to our base, nor can we remain here."

They had seen the public notices plastered throughout the capital. The shock was mutual the moment they saw 'The Star of Nagran' agreeing to aid in the investigation to find those interfering with the recruitment of new members for the Cavalry.

Just as the sage's side thought the name referred to Nahan, those Awakeners who followed Nahan also believed the Sage had joined forces with the Cavalry. Although they had come this far more out of allegiance to Nahan, the young awakeners were in a state of considerable confusion, not anticipating such a turn of events.

"I saw Nezo patrolling in the sixth wall district yesterday. Hes definitely searching for us. What should we do? Should we make a move?"

Originally, they planned to immediately capture the sage's awakeners upon their appearance. However, since ascending to the

capital, Nahan’s condition had fluctuated between improvement and deterioration. Given the current circumstances, they felt it too risky to act rashly and remained indecisive.

They gazed anxiously at Nahan, who was half-reclining, his body and one arm wrapped in bandages, eyes closed. Ever since returning alive from the west, Nahan’s condition had been precarious. Today, it seemed to be at its worst. It was inevitable, given the lack of proper treatment for his ailments and his stubborn nature.

Though he moved with his usual ease when he decided to act, one couldn’t help but wonder how long it would last. What would become of them if he suddenly died? Amidst these growing anxieties, Nahan finally opened his eyes.

His face, marred by burns, scanned the eyes of his comrades looking at him.

“Well… it’s uncertain if this is truly the sage’s doing.”

“What do you mean?”

“Think about why they are searching for us so desperately.”

“…”

Some understood the implication of his words, others did not. But all felt a common certainty of their dire situation.

“Anyway, it seems they have emerged as we waited. We must meet them.”

“Should we really meet them now? Wouldn’t it be better to wait and understand the situation more clearly? Or at least verify if Hosanna and others are with the Cavalry…”

“No. That’s unnecessary. I have no intention of delaying any longer.”

Nahan rose to his full height, gazing down at the bandage soaked with blackened blood. His cold eyes declared,

“We have done enough verification. Now it’s time to meet the sage in person. Lead me to where Nezo was sighted.”

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Chapter 636

Their second destination was Tyckenspail, a nondescript region located between the west and south. Previously unknown to Yuder, it was a small village that had remained obscure until now. Its only notable feature was a few ancient ruins. However, these are only ruins in name, as they have been long neglected and left in a state of disrepair.”

According to Kishiar, this very place was where the first Duke of Tain had sent all his research.

“It’s rare for anyone other than scholars to venture here to see the ruins… Quite unusual indeed.”

An elderly man, who had provided lodging for the three mercenaries, shook his head in wonder yet smiled. He was in a particularly good mood, thanks to the several silver coins the trio had handed him.

“If there’s anything you wish to ask, feel free. My granddaughter knows the area well. She can guide or assist you in any way.”

“Very well,” replied Kishiar, his face altered, with a light smile.

The old man soon left to prepare their meal.

“Now… let’s open the letter,” Kishiar suggested, waiting until the old man’s footsteps faded. With a relaxed smile, he pulled a small bundle of folded paper from his pocket. It was a letter that had arrived just before they entered the village, sent by the Cavalry.

“Four for me, and the last one… for the assistant.”

Yuder unfolded the small note handed to him by Kishiar.

‘Sent by Gakane, I see.’

The letter, written in the Cavalry’s cipher, showed a proficiency far surpassing his previous efforts. Although Gakane had always been adept at writing, his use of ciphers had been awkward; this was a shining result of his efforts.

Yuder quickly read through the content, appreciating it for a moment.

‘Hmm… after the Cavalry’s public announcement, the Awakeners suspected to be Nahan’s associates, frequently seen in the fifth wall district, disappeared, then reappeared in the seventh wall district. The Awakeners associated with the sage began to roam near the lodging where the sage stayed… As expected. Hinn and Finn, who were monitoring Baron Renbow, reported that he ceased frequent contact with the mercenary office… This too, is a continuation of the above matter.’

Most of the content was as he had anticipated. The cleverly worded public message from the Cavalry, about collaborating with non-member Awakeners, was showing swift effects. The insertion of the Star of Nagran was working rapidly.

By now, both the sage and Nahan’s sides would be racking their brains in suspicion of each other.

‘This is somewhat exciting. Under the guise of Star of Nagran, I wonder when they will realize who truly collaborated with us.’

The ‘Star of Nagran’, mentioned in the Cavalry’s correspondence as their collaborators, were neither the sage’s nor Nahan’s associates. They were the Awakeners from various places who hadn’t completely detached themselves from Star of Nagran and were aiding the Cavalry.

Star of Nagran wasn’t a group with clear entry and exit. Gayle and Doyle in the capital, Robel and Marty in the west aiding the mentally affected victims of Nahan, and the previous western base’s Awakeners interested in joining the Cavalryall were still members of Star of Nagran as well as collaborators.

And then there were Ershi and her colleagues, and Hosanna. Ershi, on her own accord, provided useful information to Yuder, who had given medicine to a comrade. Even Hosanna, maintaining his loyalty to Nahan, couldn’t remain indifferent before the human kindness offered by Kanna.

If either the sage or Nahan had given more significance to the existence of those Awakeners, or if anyone had grasped the situation and strived to gather them, things would not have turned out as they did. However, they acted exactly as Yuder and Kishiar had predicted.

The sage, despite knowing about his captured colleagues, had neglected them all this while. In Yuder’s view, the sage’s sense of comradeship was even poorer than Nahan’s, who had at least ventured as far as the Cavalry’s entrance.

Realistically, the captured could very well have assisted the Cavalry, yet the sage, considering Nahan a greater enemy, fell right into this minor stratagem, dismissing the others as insignificant.

‘This also proves the sage’s inward vigilance toward Nahan.’

Yuder felt a sense of pride in his intelligence agents, who had continued to perform well in his absence. His recent efforts in training them had been worthwhile.

‘But… there’s an odd bit of news at the end. Kiolle coming and talking nonsense?’

The section written by Gakane went as follows:

‘I hesitated whether to write this, but I’ll just send it. A few days ago, Kiolle Da Diarca suddenly came looking for trouble. He sought you, and we met him, but his intentions were unclear. Eventually, Kanna used her abilities to discern that he wanted to know how to contact you. We’ll respond as soon as you reply.’

A contact request. Given Kiolle had gone to the trouble of seeking him out, it seemed likely that his true aim was to convey information related to the sage’s side or his father that he had picked up somewhere.

‘It’s probably 99% related to this affair, so nothing new. But he does bring useful information occasionally… Can’t be helped.’

Yuder, with chilling accuracy even in Kiolle’s absence, decided to briefly write in his reply that there was no need to worry about what Kiolle Da Diarca would do. If Kiolle sent a letter to his side and asked Kanna to pass it, she would handle it accordingly.

Lastly, Gakane’s letter ended with a postscript, ‘Please tell Sir Zuckerman that I am diligently completing all my training tasks.’ Looking up, Yuder saw Kishiar, who had finished reading his four letters, smiling broadly at him.

“Any interesting news?”

“Nothing particularly amusing in the intelligence reports. Everything seems to be proceeding without notable issues.”

“The reports I received from each branch said much the same.”

“Ah, Gakane asked me to tell Sir Zuckerman that he’s doing well with his training tasks.”

Nathan Zuckerman, who had been sitting quietly, slightly raised his cold eyebrows.

“I thought I said there was no need to report that… Understood.”

“Maybe he’s worried you’ll stop teaching him. In such cases, isn’t it better to just praise him, Nathan?” Kishiar added with a smile. Nathan Zuckerman pondered for a moment before shaking his head.

“It seems he gets more anxious if I tell him he’s doing well. If I have to convey something, it might be better to inform him of the next training task.”

Yuder was slightly surprised. He had guessed that Nathan Zuckerman held a high regard for Gakane’s character, but he hadn’t realized the depth to which Nathan understood people.

‘Indeed. Considering he learned from Kishiar and became a swordmaster, he wouldn’t teach half-heartedly…’

Teaching inherently involves understanding each other.

One cannot teach anything without knowing something about the other person.

Yuder thought that with a mentor so dedicated to understanding his pupils, even amidst his busy schedule, Gakane would be able to focus more comfortably on his training. As Gakane’s colleague and friend, Yuder felt a great sense of satisfaction.

Consequently, the reply to Gakane contained a longer list of the next training tasks relayed by Nathan Zuckerman than Yuder’s original message. Yuder also added a special training menu designed specifically for Gakane, who was handling two training regimes simultaneously.

Had Gakane known this from afar, he might have shed tears of mixed emotion, whether they be of joy or sorrow.

After sending all the replies, Kishiar and the others stepped outside.

“We know the name of the ruins where the first Duke of Tain is said to have buried his research materials, but not the exact location. We’ll need a guide.”

Fortunately, they had the granddaughter of the elderly man at whose house they were staying. The girl, who introduced herself as Anne, agreed cheerfully to guide them to the local ruins.

“My grandfather said to answer any questions you have. I’m curious why you’d want to visit such unremarkable places… but since you said you’re mercenaries, I won’t ask.”

Their guided tour revealed three ruins in the vicinity of the village. Each was a remnant of a building presumed to have been constructed about a thousand years ago, but their original purposes were difficult to discern.

After inspecting all the buildings, Kishiar pointed to one.

“Here. This place is the most likely candidate.”

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After inspecting all the buildings, Kishiar pointed to one.

“Here. This place is the most likely candidate.”

The spot Kishiar indicated was the last of the three ruins they had seen. Yuder looked at the teetering pile of stones in the indicated direction and nodded slightly.

“I also thought this one had the highest possibility.”

“Did you? How so?”

Kishiar’s interest was piqued. He seemed curious if Yuder knew something from a previous life’s memories.

However, Yuder’s reason for choosing the third ruin had nothing to do with that. He slightly removed his hood, revealing his face only to Kishiar and Nathan Zuckerman.

The expressions of the two men subtly changed upon seeing one of his eyes turned a faint golden hue.

“With this eye, I can see the flow of magic power. Since entering the first ruin, I’ve maintained this state. I felt nothing unusual until the second, but at the third, I noticed a slight difference from before.”

What they sought were the corpses and by-products of monsters studied by the First Duke Tain. Essentially, they were after his research materials.

But why hadn’t he destroyed these by-products of his research and sent them to this remote place instead? Yuder wasn’t a scholar,

but he knew well how much scholars and mages cherished their research materials.

There were only two possible reasons for sending them here: either the materials and data from the research were too dangerous to dispose of carelessly, or they were sent to be stored out of sight.

Either way, it was highly likely they were not sent for mere disposal.

Kishiar might have thought the same, but Yuder had his own way of finding traces. That was the Eye of Magic.

‘The First Duke Tain was a mage. He managed to hide a laboratory on the fourth floor of the underground dungeon for a thousand years without being discovered. Wouldn’t he be able to hide other things as well?’

The Eye of Magic was said to brighten vision even in darkness and sensitively catch the flow of magic invisible to normal eyes. Though Yuder had little experience in controlling the eye of his own will, he could hardly feel the effect of seeing the flow of magic power, this time its power was absolutely necessary.

Thus, just before entering the first ruin, he had continuously used the power of wind very faintly. His eyes naturally brightened when he used his strength, so he thought he would be able to see anything strange.

And it seemed to have worked. As they approached the third ruin, he began to faintly see something different. Around the scattered, broken piles of stones, a faint mist swirled.

At first glance, it was a subtle aura that didn’t feel strange, but upon closer inspection, Yuder felt an abnormal flow of wind brushing against his clothes and skin.

It was a detail that anyone other than Yuder, who could wield the power of wind, would have missed otherwise.

“Like water, wind has its flow. It’s not unusual for it to get disrupted or collide, but on a day like today when the wind isn’t strong, it shouldn’t happen. That’s why, among the three ruins, I thought this place was the most suspicious.”

“I see. Are you feeling any discomfort?”

“I’m fine.”

After hearing the answer, Kishiar stared at Yuder for a moment, as if trying to discern the truth, then smiled, apparently convinced of Yuder’s sincerity.

“Indeed… You thought the same as me, but used a different method. I inspected all three ruin sites to see if what I was looking for was among them. It turned out to be here, at the third one.”

“What is it?”

“Just this.”

Kishiar nudged a pile of stones from the third ruin with his foot, lying nearby. The surface bore marks as if scratched by a knife, but weathered by wind and rain over many years, its true identity was indecipherable.

“It’s a script often used from ancient times up to the founding era. It signifies a communal graveyard.”

‘A communal graveyard?’

“Though much eroded and broken, the pattern of eight herringbone marks is still discernible enough to count. So, it’s certain.”

After saying this, Kishiar briefly explained the architectural style of communal graveyards used in ancient times.

“Graveyards from the old times all shared a common trait: they dug deep into the ground to create underground caves and built walls with stones. Though they also constructed stone entrances and small buildings above ground, they didn’t place bodies there. So, for handling large amounts of remains like a monster’s corpse or by-products, such a place would be ideal, wouldn’t it?”

His logic seemed sound. Kishiar called over Anne, a guide who had been waiting nearby alone.

“Do you know anything about this third ruin? Even an old tale would do.”

“Hmm…”

After pondering for a moment, Anne spoke up.

“Neighbor Mary’s grandmother told me once. In her grandmother’s time, a lord dug up the land here and found so many skeletons that they just reburied them. The adults said this place must have been a graveyard, but I’m not sure. The land isn’t good for farming because of the many stones, so it’s just been left as is.”

Kishiar glanced over and winked, as if to say, ‘See, I was right.’ As Yuder casually ignored his unnecessarily flamboyant face, Nathan Zuckerman handed a coin to Anne.

“We need to examine this place more, so you can go back first.”

“Oh, but my grandfather told me to guide you till the end…”

“It’s fine. Just tell him we asked you to leave early.”

Yuder learned something new about Nathan Zuckerman: despite his gruff voice, he was quite good with children. The child, seeming to have a sense of responsibility, hesitated but eventually stepped back, accepting that not disturbing the guests was part of her duty.

“I’ll come back if you’re not back by night!”

After the child left, Kishiar patted his adjutant’s shoulder in approval.

“Well done, Nathan. Now, let’s take a closer look.”

Kishiar was well-versed in how ancient communal graveyards were built and where their entrances were typically located. Just by circling the site a few times, he easily deduced what the original structure must have looked like and stroked his chin thoughtfully.

“There are more rocks buried near the presumed entrance than I thought. Perhaps using my power to gather them and reconstruct the old structure might be the best way to clear a path down.”

“I can assist with the power of earth.”

“No, it’s fine. Most of it isn’t buried but scattered on the surface, and this is no different from a puzzle. It’d be better if I do it with my power alone.”

After responding, Kishiar turned his head towards Nathan Zuckerman.

“There’s no need to worry about me using too much power, Nathan.”

“I haven’t yet expressed any concern.”

“It’s obvious.”

The man chuckled lightly through his nose and stepped forward.

Taking a deep breath, he slowly raised his hand towards the scattered piles of stones.

Yuder suddenly felt the air around them grow heavy.

The flow of power emanating from Kishiar was immense, unbelievably stemming from just one person. It spread out in concentric circles around the entire ruins. Considering how usually Kishiar's use of his Awakener's power was barely noticeable, the current magnitude of his power was astonishing.

Then, in the next moment, the stones scattered around them began to levitate with a heavy rumbling vibration. Resisting the pull of the earth that sought to drag them back down, the stones shook off their inertia and rose, creating an overwhelming sensation.

Kishiar, after surveying all the stones, gracefully lifted his hand a bit higher. The stones then started to move and converge towards a specific point.

Thud. Thud. Thud.

The rocks and stones smoothly glided into place. Each time a stone touched the ground, the earth vibrated slightly under their weight.

Large stones forming the foundation were laid first, followed by smaller ones. Despite their weathered condition, they fit together like a puzzle, forming the shape of a specific building as if reversing time. It was a magnificent spectacle.

As the number of stones that needed to be moved decreased, Kishiar's power became more skillfully controlled. What initially felt like a palpable pressure on the skin became so gentle towards the end of the construction that it was almost imperceptible.

Considering this might be his first time exerting power on such a large scale, the result was unbelievable.

‘To move so many large stones without a single one out of place, and to do it perfectly on the first try… The members struggling with power control training would have cried if they saw this.’

Immense power. A mind that could calculate numerous possibilities in an instant to produce the desired outcome in real time. And perfect control to back it up.

Yuder thought, even with his vast experience, if he were asked to replicate the feat, he could do it, but the Yuder of the past would have probably made a few mistakes due to an overflow of power on his first attempt.

In this regard, Yuder was once again struck by the monstrous ability of the man before him.

Yet, it was not something to fear or dread.

Rather, his gaze was captivated by the flow of power sufficient to rival his own.

Maybe this was what it felt like to be fascinated by something, a feeling he hadn’t quite experienced before.

“Now, the building that was at the entrance has been reconstructed. Shall we go inside? The entrance should be somewhere in there.”

With a smile, Kishiar turned his head. They entered the rustic entrance of the building without hesitation.

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Rewinding through ages, the interior of the ancient cemetery, once again revealed, was shrouded in darkness and lay desolate. The structure that Kishiar had erected was but a mere skeleton, a superficial framework, a fact that seemed all too obvious.

“If it’s built according to ancient architectural styles, the real entrance leading to the chamber of corpses should be in the innermost part of the building. So… it must be around here.”

Kishiar strode forward confidently, halting at a particular spot. The ground under his gaze was in disarray, with stones uprooted and scattered about. It appeared impossible for mere human effort to find a way down, yet none present felt a hint of despair.

Why worry when Yuder Aile, who could manipulate the earth as his limbs, was there?

“I’ll take it from here.”

Yuder directed his power towards the spot Kishiar had indicated. To others, it might have seemed like he merely flicked an eyebrow, but in that fleeting moment, Yuder had the entire surrounding terrain in his grasp.

Concentrating his immense strength, he cast his eyes downward, and the conditions beneath the earth’s surface became as clear to him as if he were observing them firsthand.

‘The reason this land seemed rocky is due to a tunnel constructed with stone walls beneath. But now, it’s blocked by the soil that has accumulated over time, making it inaccessible.’

The solution then was simple: avoid the stone framework and shift the filling soil to reveal a passageway leading down to the cave. Moving the earth was not a difficult task.

Having reached his decision, Yuder instructed only Kishiar and Nathan Zuckerman to step back. As he drew a deep breath and exerted his power again, a rumbling vibration began to emanate from below.

‘This might be felt by the villagers nearby, but they won’t think it’s an earthquake.’

“If there’s any trouble, I’ll be ready to assist,” Nathan Zuckerman said, his hand resting on the hilt of his sword. Kishiar stood close by, arms crossed, his trust implicit in his gaze. That look simultaneously stirred Yuder’s senses as an Awakener and his human emotions.

It’s a familiar task, yet the presence of an observer made everything feel different. He wanted to exert his power flawlessly, without the slightest error.

Perhaps Kishiar had entertained a similar thought just moments ago.

“Don’t worry. This will be over shortly.”

And Yuder did just that.

Moments later, the ground heaved and churned like a swamp, spewing a massive mound of earth, opening up like a gaping maw before them. Concurrently, the air currents, more violent than before, became distinctly visible to Yuder’s heightened perception.

‘It’s done.’

At last, the entrance to an ancient burial site, long concealed, was revealed before them. It was a sight different yet equally

magnificent compared to when Kishiar had erected the building.

Kishiar approached Yuder to examine the newly unveiled entrance.

“Perfect. Well found.”

“From what I see, the energy flow is stronger than before, indicating we’ve found the right place.”

“Shall we descend then?”

They stepped towards the real entrance to the underground burial chambers. As they walked between the cleared earth and stone walls, a cold, damp chill crept up their necks. The deeper they went, the darker it became, prompting Yuder to summon fire to illuminate their surroundings.

‘This place is remarkably well-preserved for its age. It looks more like an emergency underground passage than a path to a tomb.’

The path was narrow but with a ceiling considerably high. Nathan Zuckerman could walk without almost stooping. For Kishiar, however, the ceiling was still too low, forcing him to walk with his head bowed.

Nathan Zuckerman seemed slightly concerned about his lord walking hunched over, but Yuder’s worry was of a different nature. The breath of the man following right behind him felt too close than before.

“…”

It was absurd that his full attention and senses were drawn to something entirely unrelated while he was working. Thankfully, it appeared he wasn’t the only one feeling this way, as he could sense eyes fixed on the back of his neck without even looking back.

In the past, such a sensation wouldn’t have been elicited in a formal situation. But now, the clear gaze he felt, even when he realized it, didn’t waver, indicating its awareness.

This subtle yet honest change, though not significant, was profoundly pleasing to Yuder.

As Yuder pondered whether to glance back or not, a low voice reached his ears.

“Before leaving Tainu, Baron Koelt mentioned something about the research of the first Duke of Tain. He wasn’t a mage, but a scholar deeply versed in lore and history. He meticulously scrutinized the historical context of that time to understand the First Duke’s peculiar research aims and subsequent actions.”

Baron Koelt was just as earnest as Kishiar had felt when he first saw him. Despite being overwhelmed with reviving Tainu from the ruinous exploitation of the Willhem family, he hadn’t forgotten to examine the First Duke of Tain’s research.

He scoured all available documents to understand the early situations of the West and the Empire, even utilizing his distant blood relation to the Tain family to access private archives passed down in old Western noble houses.

In a few rare records left by the Duke’s retainers, Koelt sensed something.

“The First Duke of Tain kept his research secret, even from his closest retainers. They thought the Duke was more interested in something other than magic or monsters. Do you know what that was?”

“No.”

“History.”

The voice softly uttered the word.

“The First Duke of Tain had a profound interest in the history before the Great Destruction. Much of it has been lost over time, but this deep interest apparently caused considerable concern among his contemporaries.”

Back then, people were too preoccupied with surviving the future to look back at a crumbling past. Those who delved into the past were often seen as dangerous eccentrics.

Yet, the First Duke of Tain remained deeply interested in the pre-Destruction past. This wasn’t always the case. Baron Koelt cautiously suggested that the Duke’s deep interest in ‘lost history’ began around the time of the First Emperor’s demise.

“According to the Duke’s journal, his intense research on monsters also started after the Emperor’s death. It seems logical to assume a connection between the two.”

The Great Destruction, monsters, and the shattered, unknowable histories.

Koelt’s conclusion from piecing all these together was as follows.

“It’s possible that the First Emperor’s passing had something to do with those matters. That’s what was said”

Silence followed, hanging in the air like a mist.

“Of course, he hadn’t interpreted the First Duke of Tain’s journal as thoroughly as we have. His conclusion wasn’t based on complete information. Still, considering this, I think it’s a fairly reasonable conjecture. Remember the journal’s final entry?”

Yuder cast his mind back swiftly to the last sentence of the translated version Kishiar had given him.

”*After my father’s death, the only one who held the same questions was my Spiritual father. What did he gain? Where is he now after leaving Gyllandr Hill with the scripture*… That’s the part I’m referring to.”

“Yes, I remember,” Yuder replied.

“If we take that sentence at face value, after the death of the First Emperorwho was the First Duke of Tain’s fatherboth the Archmage Luma and the First Duke, Blake Van Tain, began to do things they had never done before. After the Emperor’s death, Luma left the Empire years later, and the First Duke started fervently researching lost history and monsters. Even Luma showed interest in his studies at one point.”

One death. And the altered course of others’ lives thereafter.

“The First Emperor’s death certainly left them with profound questions, sparking something new. Whether the cause was as Baron Koelt suggestedthe cause of deathor something else, remains unclear. But it’s a possibility worth considering.”

A long silence ensued. As Yuder descended the stairs, he pondered the tale Kishiar had shared.

‘The cause of the First Emperor’s death…’

The known cause of the First Emperor’s demise was simple: he had departed this world early after establishing Orr, following the prevention of the Great Destructiona legend of sorts.

His death was overshadowed by his magnificent achievements. More renowned were the tales of the Empress who led Orr alone after him and the Crown Prince who ascended to the throne as the Second Emperor under her guidance.

Thinking of the First Emperor, Yuder's mind naturally drifted to the story Enon had told him. He was the one who had seen the 'real' final page of the First Duke of Tain's research journal, which Kishiar hadn't seen.

Yuder had yet to properly share this with Kishiar due to an incomplete translation and subsequent busyness.

"Actually, I have something I'd like to share with you. Do you remember when I said there was something I'd tell you about once I was certain, after reading your translation?"

"Of course."

Yuder thought of Nathan Zuckerman behind him. He hesitated, wondering if he should speak in his presence, but Kishiar swiftly whispered a solution.

"If necessary, I can create a barrier with magic so that no one but me can hear."

"That would be fine. Either way is okay with me."

Nathan Zuckerman agreed. After a moment of consideration, Yuder nodded.

It might not be directly related to him, but since it was connected to his own experiences, he wanted to proceed with caution.

"Understood. I can create such a barrier myself, so let me use my power for a moment."

The power of the wind rose sharply, subtly altering the flow of air in its wake. Though it was uncertain if this would be entirely effective against a swordmaster, as long as the other party was not keen on listening, it would suffice.

Yuder steadied his breath and began to speak.

“Enon had unearthed hidden information within the journal. While I don’t yet know the exact original text, I have heard some key details. According to him, the Founding Emperor might have been… in a situation similar to mine.”

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Kishiar was not unaware of what being in a similar situation to Yuder meant. As his gaze rapidly shifted, Yuder continued to speak.

“Frankly, I was surprised only because the subject was His Majesty the First Emperor. Enon had been speculating for some time that there might have been someone like me in the past. If the hidden content in the journal is true, then that speculation is finally proven.”

“If he has always thought so, was there some basis for this speculation?”

Yuder hesitated for a moment, wondering if he should reveal more, but his deliberation was brief.

He already knew from Enon himself that Enon was no ordinary human. To explain the situation, he felt the need to preemptively establish Enon’s extensive knowledge about the Archmage Luma.

“Enon knows things about the Archmage Luma that others do not. According to him, Luma was secretly conducting some research before leaving the Empire.”

“Just like the First Duke Tain, his disciple.”

“Yes.”

Kishiar did not ask why Enon knew so much about Luma. He was only interested in the core of Yuder’s statement.

“What exactly was the research about? Was it on a similar theme to the Duke’s?”

“No, what he studied was…”

Yuder murmured, gazing into the darkness unfolding before them.

“…a method to reverse time.”

It was an unprecedented feat, yet one that Yuder Aile had personally experienced.

Yuder recalled the words Enon had spoken after discovering his secret.

The Archmage Luma had long secretly studied magic to reverse time. Despite being a formidable mage who created beings like Enon, he failed to achieve results and eventually left the Empire.

Enon speculated that Luma might have started this bizarre research after encountering someone like Yuder who had traveled back in time. Finally, in the hidden last pages of the First Duke Tain’s research journal, he found something to support this theory.

‘If everything written here is based on fact, then the subject might have been the First Emperor of this nation.’

He couldn’t be sure, but the important thing seemed to be that both the First Duke Tain and Luma believed it.

The legendary Archmage and his disciple, a Duke descended from the First Emperor, were intelligent and remarkable enough to believe such a tale. What could have happened to make them believe in such a story?

The time when both began their strange, secretive research coincided with the demise of the First Emperor. One sought to control the flow of time, researching the origins of monsters, while

the other endeavored to create magic that could directly reverse time.

Though their approaches differed, both were linked by their research on time.

Could it be that the First Emperor of the empire, like Yuder, was someone who had returned by reversing time?

“To sum up… both the Archmage Luma and the First Duke Tain conducted secret research related to time, possibly because of the First Emperor who founded this Empire. If he was indeed a being like you, then surprisingly, everything makes sense.”

“Yes.”

Kishiar, not smiling as usual, seemed to weigh his thoughts in a long silence, indicating he did not take the situation lightly.

As time passed, he finally spoke again.

“Though you might already know, records from that era are scarce,” began Kishiar, with a hint of bitterness. “It was believed right to destroy the belongings of the deceased, and due to the limitations of technology, even proper paper was scarce. This led to the priests rigorously memorizing the scriptures of the Sun God to prevent loss, combining oral tradition with the little documentation that survived.”

Most of the records that remained were reconstructions by later generations, mixing oral tales with scant historical evidence. Kishiar let out a brief, sardonic laugh.

“Even the artifacts from that time stored in the imperial palace are sometimes doubted for their authenticity, so no further explanation is necessary, I believe.”

Yuder remained silent, contemplating.

“However, recently, quite coincidentally, I had the chance to delve into the few records of that era.”

Following a dream about Yuder’s death, Kishiar had borrowed numerous forbidden texts. Among them were diaries and records written by the Empress and court ladies during the time of the First Emperor.

‘But there probably was nothing about the cause of the First Emperor’s death or about reversing time. Otherwise, it would have been known long ago.’

While Yuder pondered this, Kishiar continued softly.

“Back then, I didn’t consider looking into matters related to the First Emperor, focusing only on what seemed relevant to me. But I will revisit them once I return. There might be something hidden yet undiscovered.”

“Understood,” Yuder replied.

“For now, let’s start by examining the traces of the First Duke Tain here.”

Yuder restored the flow of air he had previously blocked. Nathan Zuckerman, who had been standing deliberately turned away, finally turned his head, his cautiousness to avoid overhearing anything inadvertently speaking of his trustworthiness.

“The conversation is over, Nathan. Let’s go.”

“Understood.”

They continued along the stone-lined tunnel. When they reached the first branching path, they thought they had found what they were looking for. However, at its end, they found only a small chamber, a dead-end cave filled with scattered human bones.

The situation remained similar thereafter. Side paths branched off from the main tunnel, leading to what were clearly ancient bone fragments, half-buried in mounds of dirt, eerily peeking out.

‘This must be what the child who guided us earlier was talking about.’

It was easy to imagine how a lord from a bygone era, digging into this land, must have shuddered at such a discovery. It made sense why they would reburied it and never looked back.

But the three present were too seasoned and experienced to be frightened by such things.

“Ancient communal graveyards often follow this ant-hill-like structure,” Kishiar explained, with the same bright demeanor he had when guiding through the palace.

“The closer to the entrance, the older the graves, and as the number of the dead increased, deeper tunnels were dug for additional burial chambers. Judging by the scale, this might have originated before the Great Destruction.”

“I thought it was more like a shelter,” Yuder remarked.

“Indeed, it might have served that purpose too,” Kishiar agreed nonchalantly.

A millennium had passed, yet the tunnel retained its formidable structure, prompting Kishiar to muse aloud. “It seems a waste to construct such durable tunnels solely for the purpose of storing corpses. They might have also served as shelters during disasters. In fact, in the communal graveyards from the founding era near the capital, artifacts of people who took refuge from monster invasions have been found.”

“I see,” Yuder acknowledged.

“By the way, what do you see? Is the flow of magic getting stronger?”

“Well, it’s been fairly constant since we entered here.”

“A new fork in the path has appeared ahead.”

At that moment, Nathan Zuckerman, who had been silently following, brought attention to a new fork in their path. Unlike the previous paths, this one was not a mere offshoot; it was significantly larger.

Yuder calmly observed the two paths. His eyes, shining with a golden hue, sensed a stronger flow to the right.

“It seems to be the right path.”

“Yes, the stones forming the wall are less worn on the right than the left, meaning it was excavated more recently.”

They proceeded to the right, but what they encountered at the end defied their expectations.

“…It’s a dead end.”

“What do you see?”

“The same as before.”

“Then, there’s no reason to be deceived.”

Kishiar rotated his wrist, casually scanning the surroundings. A surge of golden magic flowed from his red eyes, signaling his intention to use magic as an Awakener.

Yuder’s eyes responded to Kishiar’s magic, shining even more intensely.

“This place, unlike the Tainu’s underground prison, is not an appropriate location for a protection mechanism that can only be opened by blood relatives. So, our options are quite straightforward. I’ve studied a bit to avoid the frustration of missing the way like before, even when it’s right in front of us.”

With a smile, Kishiar began to cast his spell.

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Chapter 640

“This place, unlike the Tainu’s underground prison, is not an appropriate location for a protection mechanism that can only be opened by blood relatives. So, our options are quite straightforward. I’ve studied a bit to avoid the frustration of missing the way like before, even when it’s right in front of us.”

With a smile, Kishiar began to cast his spell.

A dazzlingly bright light burst forth, accompanied by golden magic power emanating from Kishiar’s hand, filling the space before them. The light, akin to the wind but distinct, illuminated the area before slowly fading away.

The dead-end they faced was no longer blocked. As if there had never been a wall there, a clear passage opened before them.

“…What exactly did you do?”

“I combined a simple yet effective spell with the ancient and useful artifact, the Mirror of Truth, which even I can use.”

Kishiar showed a small, worn mirror he held in his hand.

‘It’s the magic tool he acquired to investigate the relic sent by Prince Ejain.’

The magic power wrapped around the mirror seemed somewhat diminished compared to when he first received it from Mrs. Justin, but it didn’t appear to have lost all its power.

“Bringing useful tools like this is essential when coming to such a place.”

The man, adept at concealing his thorough preparedness behind a smile, winked and moved forward.

“I prepared because I thought there was a high probability that there was at least one mechanism like this hidden there. It’s fortunate we needed it.”

“But you used too much power. Is the vessel… alright?”

Nathan Zuckerman expressed concern.

“If it were before, I’d definitely need to rest for a few days after this. But not now. I can endure much more these days. Haven’t you noticed the increasing stability of my vessel?”

“That is… true.”

Indeed, Kishiar looked almost unscathed. He was sweating slightly on his forehead but did not seem as drained as he had been after using magic in the underground of the Cavalry Headquarters.

Yuder, having observed Kishiar’s increasing frequency of using power, felt strange upon hearing this confirmation. The gap between suspicion and certainty was both close and far. The thought that his visible strength was not only due to skill development but also increased stability of his vessel brought back old memories.

Kishiar La Orr had always yearned to unleash the full extent of his power, striving tirelessly to achieve his goals even in impossible situations. How brilliantly radiant and free he had looked, carving a massive sword mark on the wall with a cracked wooden sword.

His current state was a testament to those efforts.

Nathan Zuckerman, too, seemed to share this sentiment, unable to take his eyes off his lord who stood proudly on the ground.

Knowing the times when Kishiar had been in such a dire state that he contemplated death, Zuckerman could somewhat guess how he felt about this situation.

“Since discovering that the power to stabilize the cracked vessel originated from my own abilities, I’ve become much stronger. It’s all thanks to my assistant. So, don’t worry about me anymore, Nathan.”

‘…Wait. Why is my name coming up here?’

Yuder paused, furrowing his brows.

While tending to Emperor Keilusa, he realized that the power protecting the cracked vessel didn’t solely come from ‘Awakening’ itself, but rather, it required the addition of Kishiar’s power. However, this was not due to Yuder’s merit.

He was about to speak, but Nathan Zuckerman was quicker to open his mouth.

“I understand. And congratulations on achieving yet another higher realm.”

Surprisingly, this knight readily agreed with his lord’s nonsensical statement. Consequently, Yuder completely missed the chance to assert that it wasn’t thanks to him.

Without expressing unnecessary worry, but rather extending congratulations, he was infinitely similar to his lord in that regard.

Even if Kishiar reassured him that there was no need for concern, someone as diligent as Nathan Zuckerman wouldn’t easily set aside his worries. However, after the congratulations, the knight’s demeanor became noticeably more relaxed.

But as they advanced along the newly revealed path and reached the largest room so far, the three could no longer engage in

conversation.

“…This is.”

Kishiar, rubbing his chin and tilting his head, stood beside Yuder, who was frowning and scanning the surroundings with only his eyes.

“If Hellem had been here, she would have really appreciated this intentionally arranged setup.”

The vast room was filled with what seemed to be hundreds of monster bones. However, their arrangement was somewhat peculiar. Laid out in orderly fashion, each bone placed as if with specific intent, without touching one another, the scene was somewhat chilling.

Why had the First Duke of Tain left the remains in such a manner after his research was completed?

“Yuder, what does the flow of magic power look like now?”

“Since the wall concealing this place was breached, it’s almost disappeared. It seems the magic power I saw originated from that magic.”

“So, the place itself wasn’t magically altered.”

Muttering to himself, Kishiar looked around and then gave an order.

“Since the area is open on all sides, there’s no need to stick together. Let’s spread out and check for anything unusual. Look for any traces the First Duke of Tain might have left.”

“Understood.”

The three dispersed, walking among the bones, searching for anything amiss. Yuder, maintaining the brilliance of his Eye of Magic,

floated several flames in the air to illuminate the area.

‘Up close, it’s even more bizarre. To think there was a reason to arrange monster bones like this…’

To the faint-hearted, the sight upon entering could have been overwhelming, enough to cause a fainting spell. However, for Yuder, who was accustomed to slaying monsters and piling up even more corpses, it was merely a slightly unpleasant and strange place, nothing more, nothing less.

As if taking a stroll, Yuder walked around, examining the bones laid out below.

‘Some are fairly intact, while others are almost entirely eroded. Were the old monsters softer than the ones appearing now?’

Monster corpses and bones decay very slowly due to their sturdiness, which is why weapons made from monster by-products are so popular.

But the bones here varied greatly in condition. Some were well-preserved enough to still have dried flesh clinging to them, while others were so decayed that only rotten soil and a few fragments suggested that something had once lain there.

If it weren’t for their precise, evenly spaced arrangement, reminiscent of pieces in a well-ordered strategy game, it would have been difficult to even guess what had been there.

As he continued to walk, looking down, Yuder suddenly realized something.

There seems to be a pattern between the spots where corpses have almost completely decayed and those where they haven’t.

After the almost unrecognizable, severely decayed corpses, there were invariably bodies of similar size in a more average state. Following the relatively intact corpses were again those barely distinguishable as bodies. It seemed that differences in size were also considered to avoid confusion with the other nearby bodies.

At first, he thought it might be the difference between a corpse that had been studied by the First Duke of Tain and a corpse that had not. But something about that explanation nagged at the back of his mind.

Pondering what it could be, Yuder stopped in front of a corpse that, though heavily decayed, still had a considerable amount of bone left.

This is good. It should be easy to distinguish it from the one next to it.

He alternated his gaze between two corpses of nearly the same size.

Then, after a moment, he furrowed his brows and pressed his lips together tightly.

What is this?

Careful not to disturb the bones, he knelt down on one knee.

Upon closer inspection, his earlier suspicion became clearer.

This isnt a monsters corpse, is it?

He stood up and started walking around more swiftly than before, searching for the ‘overly decayed’ corpses with more traces left. After finding a few more, he felt more certain that his theory might be correct.

Here, not only were there monster corpses, but also a considerable mix of other animal remains.

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Chapter 641

Here, not only were there monster corpses, but also a considerable mix of other animal remains.

The scene would have been chilling enough had it been just the monsters' bodies arranged in such a manner, but to include the carcasses of other beasts as well was perplexing. What could the First Duke Tain possibly be thinking or intending with this?

"Could there be a magical formation or something of that sort here?"

Mages could create formations capable of invoking magic power using magic stones and various artifacts. The mages of the Western Mage Union also made large-scale formations, although individually weaker, to protect their strongholds and conduct research.

But if it were something like that, it shouldn't be invisible to my eyes

Yuder scanned the scattered bodies with a suspicious gaze before shaking his head.

He then resumed his walk around the area, focusing particularly on the traces of the beast carcasses. He hoped to grasp the intent behind this arrangement by identifying the types of beasts.

However, even for him, who had extensive experience observing wildlife in the mountains, it was challenging to deduce everything from a few decayed bone fragments.

There are too few traces compared to the monster carcasses.

Upon closer inspection, he realized that whoever brought these bodies here had used various means for preservation. It would have been impossible for the carcasses of beasts from a millennium ago to remain to this extent without such efforts.

It would have been easier if they were bones of monsters or humans. Yuder, squinting his eyes, which started to throb slightly, stared intently at the remains of a beast with long horns.

He strained his mind, trying to deduce whether the decaying horn fragments belonged to a deer or a reindeer when his gaze inadvertently drifted to the monster carcasses lying nearby.

…Now that I look at it, there are horns on the monster carcasses as well.

Yuder observed the well-preserved horns on the monster carcass, then turned to look at the adjacent beast carcass.

Somewhat… the horns seem strikingly similar in shape.

Horns are among the parts that preserve well even after death. With a bit of time, he could confirm the astonishing similarity in size and shape of the horns on both carcasses.

Yuder recalled the numerous monsters he had encountered. Monsters typically had no consistent form, with a wide variety of types making a complete catalog an endless task. Yet, he realized, there was a commonality in their bizarre appearances.

Sometimes they resemble other animals, insects, or even plants.

Take, for instance, the giant Pethuamet he had recently defeated, or even the Long-tailed Gumbo named Penpen.

The creature had an appearance that defied all norms, but its disproportionately large mouth was notable. Its long, curled tongue

used for snaring prey and the barbed tail resembled the chameleons found in the south.

Of course, its smooth fur was nothing like a chameleon's, and in some aspects, it even reminded him of a giant caterpillar, though only in certain parts.

And what about the winged monsters? The wings commonly seen on monsters usually resembled those of birds or bats. Yuder had never encountered any that flew with wings unlike the typical concept of 'wings'.

Yuder had always thought the similarities were merely coincidental and had never pondered deeply on this point until now.

He looked down at the two sets of horns for a long time, lost in thought.

Could it be that the reason why the First Duke Tain alternated the carcasses of beasts and monsters here was related to this peculiar commonality he sensed? It was still too early for certainty.

Yet, somehow, he felt an intuition stirring within him. A faint sense that his current line of thought was not far from the truth sharply emerged in his mind.

"Now, it seems we have seen enough. Everyone, come this way."

Soon after, Kishiar called them over. He stood by the carcass at the center.

"Shall we share what we've found? Who wants to go first?"

"I will," Yuder said, raising his hand lightly. Kishiar, noticing something in his eyes, smiled intriguedly.

"Alright, speak."

“I haven’t found traces of the First Duke Tain. However, I believe I understand some of his intentions. Both of you must have already noticed that there are as many ordinary beast carcasses mixed here as there are monster carcasses.”

As Yuder expected, neither Kishiar nor Nathan Zuckerman seemed particularly surprised by this revelation.

“Yes, I’ve noticed that too,” Kishiar acknowledged.

“From my examination, there appears to be at least one physical commonality between the beast and monster carcasses lying side by side. Either the horns are similar, or the position and length of four long fangs. Although decay makes complete verification difficult, I believe most others would be similar as well.”

Kishiar and Nathan Zuckerman’s gazes turned to the surrounding carcasses. Nathan’s eyes narrowed slightly.

“I did think there were many carcasses of similar size placed side by side, but horns and fangs… May I take a look myself?”

“Of course. Follow me.”

Yuder showed them a few examples that were visually easier to spot commonalities among the ones he had found here. After examining several carcasses, Nathan Zuckerman, standing in front of the horn fragments Yuder first observed, finally nodded in agreement.

“They indeed bear a striking resemblance. I hadn’t paid attention to such details before… but this seems like an undeniable commonality.”

“The fact that monsters often have unpredictable forms and sometimes bear body parts resembling other flora and fauna in unusual places is well-known to those familiar with hunting them.

However, seeing animal and monster carcasses with directly similar features placed side by side like this is a first for me… they seem even more alike than I thought.”

Nathan Zuckerman from the Peletta Knights, experienced enough in hunting to create their own monster compendium, slowly nodded his head. His agreement with Yuder’s observation and his evident astonishment were clearly discernible in that small gesture.

“I believe,” he began, “that these corpses here were deliberately chosen by the First Duke Tain, each bearing body parts strikingly similar to its own. It seems highly probable he wanted to leave behind something he discovered while studying these monsters.”

“Rather than wanting to leave it behind… it might be more accurate to say he wanted to show it to someone who would eventually come here. The act of merely leaving research results is quite different from wanting to communicate an intention to someone else.”

Kishiar, who had been quietly observing everything, finally spoke. His eyes sparkled with evident delight at Yuder’s discovery, and he parted his lips in a smile that seemed too bright for such a grim setting.

“The deliberate placement of beasts and monsters with resembling parts, as Yuder suggests, clearly indicates an intention to emphasize their similarities. Fascinating. Truly an interesting discovery.”

His smile was brighter than seemed fitting for such a place. But what did it matter? Brightness was preferable to darkness. As he was caught in that smile, Kishiar smoothly began his praises again.

“It must be because you are well-acquainted with both monsters and beasts that you were able to make such a swift discovery.

Someone like me, who only eats what others have caught, would have taken much longer to realize."

"If you say so, what does that make me, who was in charge of hunting for the Duke?"

Nathan Zuckerman protested softly. His tone was serious, but the protest was not heartfelt. It was only today that Yuder realized Nathan could joke like this with Kishiar.

"It's just that I happened to be near such conspicuous corpses, which expedited my discovery. Both of you would have realized it soon enough, so let's end the embarrassing compliments."

"Oh dear. Even giving sincere praise is difficult."

After saying this, Kishiar turned his head towards Nathan Zuckerman.

"So, Nathan, what have you discovered?"

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“So, Nathan, what have you discovered?”

“I have found something over here. I will explain as you follow.”

Nathan Zuckerman strode purposefully toward the direction he had been exploring.

“Unlike Baron Aile, I did not think to look for traces on the corpse, so I focused mainly on the walls and the ground of this cave. Even if no magical traces are felt, physical traces could still be present.”

“That’s right.”

Kishiar agreed.

“So, I focused on the places where traces are more likely to be left and found this. Look here.”

Yuder stopped walking. Nathan Zuckerman’s finger pointed to where the cave’s dug-out wall met the ground. At first, it was too dark to see clearly, but when an extra light was summoned, something became visible.

‘That is…’

Half-buried in the spot, no bigger than a small coin, was something difficult to identify due to the wear of time, peeking out from the long-decayed and earth-turned dust.

“It might be an object left by the First Duke Tain, or it might not be. But it certainly looks like it has been here for a very long time.”

“Your keen eye is remarkable, Nathan. Well done. Shall we take a closer look?”

Praising his subordinate, Kishiar bent down to carefully lift the object. Yuder, ready to unleash his power or draw his sword at any moment, stayed alert.

In the tense atmosphere, Kishiar casually turned the metal fragment this way and that, examining it in the light, then uttered a thoughtful ‘Hmm…?’

“Did you find something?”

“Yes. It’s badly damaged, but I’ve seen something like this before. I think I know what it is.”

“What is it?”

“A brooch used by mages.”

Kishiar dusted off the metal fragment and held it up clearly on his palm.

“In times when mages were rare, ancient mages used to wear brooches to reveal their identity. Nowadays, there’s no need for that, but thanks to that tradition, many mages still wear gemstone brooches.”

Indeed, mages often wore brooches adorned with gemstones or jewels, supposedly to compensate for their lack of magic power. He hadn’t realized there was also a symbolic meaning behind it.

‘Thais Yulman did too… and so did many mages from the Western Mage Union. Even the gifts sent to me were in the form of brooches…’

“Then, could this be an object of the First Duke Tain?”

“Surprisingly, no.”

“How can you be so sure?”

“Look closely at the pattern on the surface.”

Kishiar tapped the brooch’s surface with his fingernail tip. A bit of black ash fell away, revealing a faintly engraved pattern.

“Lemon flower pattern. A mage who used this pattern as his symbol existed a thousand years ago. A very famous one. Can you guess who?”

The mention of lemon flowers sparked a memory.

“Could it be, Luma?”

“Correct.”

Yuder was right. Recalling the face of Enon, who particularly liked lemons, he exhaled softly.

“But the First Duke Tain was Luma’s disciple. A disciple could well have had a brooch bearing his master’s symbol.”

“That wouldn’t have been the case by the standards of that era. Ancient mages never passed such objects to others. However… there were exceptions.”

Kishiar paused briefly, gazing at the brooch fragment in his palm.

“When mourning the dead.”

As if leaving flowers at a tomb, it is said that ancient mages used to leave their brooches at the graves of their close mage friends.

“It’s not officially known, but in reality, a brooch similar to this one is also stored in the imperial treasury. It’s said to have been found in

front of the Dawn Palace office, where the First Empress often stayed, after her demise and the conclusion of her funeral.”

By then, the Archmage Luma had already left the Empire for some time. People whispered that Luma, who was a close friend of the Empress and hadn’t appeared at her funeral, might already be dead. However, they were greatly surprised to find the brooch left there after the funeral.

“But since only a bouquet and the brooch were left behind, it was unclear whether Luma himself had placed it there, so it was not made public. The Second Emperor also seemed to think there was no need to widely publicize it.”

“I see. So this item might also have been left in the same manner.”

“It’s hard to believe, but if it were an Archmage of that caliber, wouldn’t it be possible? Coming all the way here, where the disciple’s hidden research results are, and leaving a trace behind. It’s a plausible guess, especially since there’s already another precedent.”

It was an astonishing possibility. Luma, known to have left the Empire never to return, might have secretly come back.

Even Enon, who seemed to know more about Luma than anyone, had never mentioned such a story. Yuder felt certain this was a fact even Enon might not know.

“Fortunately for us, we have someone who can discern whether this truly is an item left by Luma.”

“Yes. I was thinking the same.”

With a slight smile, Kishiar tucked the brooch fragment into his pocket.

“We’ll need to send this to the headquarters of the Cavalry immediately upon our return.”

Thinking of the brooch as possibly left in mourning for a deceased mage, the black clumps of soil surrounding it felt different. Perhaps they were part of a bouquet, like the one reported to have been left in front of the First Empress’s office.

“Well, this allows us to conjecture a few new facts.”

Kishiar spoke as he walked towards the central area.

“Firstly, this place might be even more important for the research findings of the First Duke Tain than the underground dungeon where the research journal was found. Secondly, after this place was created, someone infiltrated and left a brooch of mourning. Thirdly, that someone is presumed to be Luma.”

Laid out like that, it was truly remarkable. It felt like reading a page from an ancient legend.

“Combining all three leads to one conclusion: this place likely had significance enough for Luma to visit. And I have just discovered traces of an ancient ‘Sword Formation’ right here in this central area.”

Kishiar stood in front of the corpse at the very center.

‘Sword Formation?’

It was a term Yuder couldn’t recall ever hearing, likely related to ancient knowledge. But as Kishiar continued, it indeed seemed to be the case.

“The Sword Formation is a tactical setup from an old strategy game no longer played. To succeed in this formation, a special rule required promoting all ordinary pieces to knight pieces, allowing the

multiplied knights to overwhelmingly push against the enemy with their superior strength.”

“That sounds almost too overpowering for a tactic.”

“Haha. It’s indeed overpowered, but it’s considered an unrealistic tactic nowadays, hence not used anymore. However, some speculate that strategy games were based on real military strategies, suggesting that such tactics might have been possible in ancient times.”

“So, knight pieces represent masters of the sword. Does that mean, in ancient times, it was easy for ordinary people to become swordmasters?”

Nathan Zuckerman, who had been listening quietly, asked with a slight frown.

“It’s uncertain. What I meant to say is that the layout here resembles that of the Sword Formation. When we discovered the fourth-floor research lab in the underground dungeon of Tainu, something was also hidden in a manner related to strategy games. It seems the First Duke Tain was as fond of strategy games as I am.”

Kishiar’s eyes sparkled. It seemed he found great enjoyment in discovering traces of such ancient strategy games.

“So, what’s the relevance of this formation to our current situation?”

“In any case, if the formation is successful, the greatest advantage is here. At the center, where the piece is placed.”

Kishiar looked down at the corpse beneath his feet.

“So, if there is any trace of the First Duke Tain hidden here, it might be right below this.”

“Then it should be easy.”

Yuder’s eye shone brighter, now with a golden hue. Simultaneously, the ground where the corpse lay collapsed, revealing something hidden.

It was a bundle of papers wrapped in black leather.

‘Just as Kishiar speculated.’

Yuder snatched it up and carefully unfolded it. The writing inside was in an ancient language that was unrecognizable, yet the paper felt oddly familiar.

‘As if torn from somewhere Could it be a separated page from that journal?’

Touching it, it seemed likely. What content could be so important that it needed to be hidden this way? After confirming the papers were safe, Yuder handed them to Kishiar.

“Good. We’ll check it when we return. If we delay any longer, our little guide might think we’ve disappeared and come looking for us. Let’s head back now.”

“Yes, understood.”

The return journey was much faster than the way in. Once Yuder emerged onto the ground, he immediately closed the entrance to the cemetery, and Kishiar likewise disassembled the structure he had erected.

Now, no one would know what had transpired here.

“What? You’re leaving at dawn tomorrow? Didn’t you say there was more to see?”

Seeing the three mercenaries announcing their departure upon their return, the inn's elderly owner expressed deep disappointment. He had expected to earn a few more days of lodging fees, and his sadness at their sudden departure was evident.

"Yes, we are departing earlier than expected. However, your granddaughter was an excellent guide, which expedited our work. As a token of our gratitude, we would like to offer an additional fee for her guidance."

"Really? Ha-ha-ha. Anne will be so happy to hear that."

The old man's face lit up with a smile as he accepted a few more silver coins. He then prepared a lavish meal for the three, using the best ingredients he could find.

Naturally, more than half of that meal ended up in Yuder's stomach.

"I have carefully packaged the brooch and sent it by courier hawk. Now, the only thing left is to decipher these papers."

Kishiar unfolded the bundle of papers he had concealed and brought with him, sitting in a chair.

"I'll be translating it on the spot, so the meaning might not be exact… But if you're curious, would you like to listen?"

"Yes."

"I'm not that curious, so I will step outside for a bit. Earlier, I saw the little girl chopping wood in the backyard on behalf of her grandfather."

Nathan Zuckerman rose and silently left the room. Kishiar, watching his departure with a subtly amused smile, waited until the door closed before extending his hand.

“Hmm. When an opportunity presents itself, how can one refuse? Come over here and let’s look at this together.”

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Chapter 643

“Hmm. When an opportunity presents itself, how can one refuse? Come over here and let’s look at this together.”

‘…Opportunity?’

Yuder’s gaze shifted to the door through which Nathan Zuckerman had just exited.

‘So, he didn’t really go to help the kid splitting firewood but left to ensure it was just the two of us?’

If it was between those who trusted each other implicitly, such a move wouldnt be problematic. But whether such a level of personal trust existed between him and Yuder…

‘In my previous life, definitely not. And in this life…’

Previously, Yuder had warned Nathan Zuckerman to be wary of him and to protect Kishiar. Nathan found the strange request somewhat amusing, yet he had faithfully followed it until now.

It was understandable that Nathan had shared information and advice with Yuder, citing the need to protect Kishiar. Yuder had often seen Nathan wear a peculiar expression whenever he saw him with Kishiar. Naturally, Yuder believed that Nathan, despite his complicated feelings, would maintain a proper distance.

However… the change in Nathan’s inner thoughts might have been deeper and more significant than Yuder anticipated.

In his previous life, Nathan Zuckerman rarely left Kishiar’s side, especially after the manifestation incident. His protectiveness had

only intensified, always trying to guard Kishiar from a distance whenever Yuder came to report.

For Nathan to leave his post on his own accord, without any official reason or Kishiars command, was unprecedented.

‘Even after witnessing my heat a few days ago, he made this decision? Can it be true?’

Such an event would normally lead Nathan to heighten his guard around Yuder, not lessen it. Yet, it seemed the knight’s judgment was contrary to Yuder’s expectations.

Mixed feelings swirled within Yuder: a desire to tell Nathan not to let his guard down so easily, and a complex appreciation for Nathans silent show of trust.

“Why that expression? Are you disappointed that Nathan left?”

At that moment, Kishiar, quick to notice, inquired. Even while smiling, his eyes were scanning every subtle reaction from Yuder.

“No, its just…it feels unusual for Sir Zuckerman to leave us alone. Of course, I would prefer it if we could interpret the papers more closely together.”

Yuder cleared his mind. As he sat down beside Kishiar, a faint scent wafted from him, tickling Yuder’s skin in a welcoming gesture before dissipating.

“Think positively. Its rare for someone like Nathan, who seldom shows his heart, to demonstrate his intentions this way. Its a sign of his trust and regard for you.”

Of course, it was natural. Warmth and contentment seeped through Kishiar’s voice.

Yuder, staring at the indecipherable script, suddenly spoke up.

“Truthfully, I thought he should be more wary of me. While I dont dislike being acknowledged, it does worry me a bit.”

“What a world this is.”

Kishiar exclaimed with exaggerated surprise, breaking into laughter.

“Ive seen you strive for recognition, but to be uneasy about it is something else. Well, my assistant, who has declined the Deputy Commander position several times, is a remarkable person. Its like seeing that resolute side of you again, and it kindles a sense of nostalgia.”

“Its not a joke.”

“I know.”

Kishiar’s eyes softened.

“But have you considered that Nathan, knowing you say such things, ultimately had no choice but to trust and leave?”

“What do you mean by that…”

As Yuder slightly furrowed his brow, a finger gently approached, smoothing the crease with a soft press.

“No matter how much one tries to stay alert, if the other shows only perfection, leaving no room for doubt, and then goes a step further to say its okay to be even more vigilant… In such a case, even I would have to admit defeat.”

Yuder wondered if Kishiar already knew about the conversation he had once had with Nathan Zuckerman. It seemed impossible, yet his words were as precise as if he had been there.

“Nathan and you have quite a few similar traits in your personalities. I’ve always thought that the two of you could become good friends. It seems like you’ve already started scheming together behind my back, but I mean even better friends than that.”

‘…’

What’s so good about becoming friends? The notion that having a similar temperament to his was hardly a compliment to Nathan Zuckerman, was it?

And why was Kishiar talking about this, smiling as if he was more pleased than anyone else? Did he actually enjoy the fact that Nathan Zuckerman and Yuder had conspired to share information about him?

These unclear thoughts flitted through Yuders mind, but he remained silent. Yet, the significance of Nathan Zuckerman having left them alone seemed to have almost entirely dissipated.

“Well then, shall we take a closer look now?”

Kishiar carefully placed a bundle of papers between their knees, making sure it was also visible to Yuder.

The papers, fragile as if they could crumble at any moment, transformed in Kishiar’s hands. As if possessed with a will of their own, they gently rose, easily shedding the layers of time that had bound them, separating into five distinct sheets.

“First, Ill read through them, and then well start interpreting.”

With that explanation, Kishiar turned his gaze to the first sheet. Yuder observed as his red eyes calmly and quickly scanned the page.

The man meticulously went through the first, then the second, and the third pages. It took quite some time to flip through and read all five pages, an unbelievable feat considering it was ancient script.

After reviewing the pages, Kishiar looked down as if digesting the content, and then, a while later, his gaze lifted again. He reached into his bag and pulled out a small book. A glance at the cover revealed it was a book on ancient grammar.

“When did you manage to pack that?”

“I brought a thin one, thinking it might be useful. I’ve never been beaten when it comes to preparedness since childhood. Though Ive recently realized that even that preparedness can falter in the face of someone who is truly earnest.”

Kishiar joked as he opened the book, placing it next to the ancient paper, comparing and scrutinizing several points. Only after completing this task did he close the book and turn to Yuder.

A deep breath followed a long pause.

“This is really… incredibly significant. Now I understand why someone wanted to tear it apart and keep it separate.”

Yuder was ready to listen. He tensed, waiting for the words that would follow from Kishiars mouth.

“I had only briefly skimmed the document, so it couldn’t be said that I had read it in its entirety. However, to summarize, the First Duke Tain, Blake Van Tain, seemed to believe that the section you discovered during your monster research might be the key to the answer he was seeking.”

After speaking these complex words, Kishiar pointed his finger towards a certain part of the unfolded paper.

Some cursed beings had the ears of a rabbit, the wings of a bird, the tail of a dog, and the claws of a mole. Others bore the eyes of a cat and the scales of a fish. 'The Word of God' speaks of these mixed beings as coming from the world of the Black Moon. I long believed this to be a falsehood. Yet, as time passed while I compared and collected similar entities, my thoughts began to change.

Silence followed.

The cursed monsters sent by the Black Moon. Where did the curse originate? Where did the Word of God begin? What is the Black Moon? When I pondered these questions, I suddenly realized a certain truth.

His words were a string of concepts that defied conventional understanding. Even if mages were known for their lack of piety, they didn't usually stray this far from general reasoning. It was almost as if questioning where the sun rose or why water flowed.

'Perhaps being from the early days of the nation, his common sense differed from ours.'

While Yuder pondered this, Kishiar quietly continued as he turned to the next page.

I have seen all the processes by which my fathers unbelievable achievements were exaggerated into legends. When humans need to comprehend an inconceivable reality with their own strength, or wish to pass down knowledge that should endure for future generations, they create legends. Thinking in this way seemed to reveal the answer.

Kishiar hesitated briefly after saying this.

Is 'The Word of God' truly the word of a god?

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Chapter 644

A chilling silence flowed like the depths of water.

Yuder pondered again over the shocking content of the words he had just heard.

‘The Word of God… Is it truly divine?’

The meaning of these divine words was, of course, naturally associated with the scriptures. Yuder, not particularly devout, was aware that the texts written in the Sun God’s scriptures were said to be the accounts of prophets who had directly heard the Word of God. This was common knowledge.

However, if the words written on this paper were true, then the First Duke of Tain had denied the very idea that ‘the scriptures were the direct word of God.’

If the scriptures were not the word of God, then many miraculous events believed to have been divine interventions would also be denied. What about the divine power exhibited by the priests?

A thought crossed Yuder’s mind, a memory of what Kishiar had said before.

‘Some mages had argued that the existence of divine power does not prove the existence of a god, hadn’t they?’

But this statement was even more shocking and bold than that debate. If someone had found this bundle of papers before them, it would have been burned immediately upon deciphering.

Yuder understood why Kishiar had said, ‘I see why it was hidden here.’

“So… the First Duke of Tain believed that the words in the scriptures were all fabricated by humans?”

“That’s the gist of it. Despite the Temple of the Sun God being weak at that time, it was undoubtedly a dangerous notion.”

Despite saying this, Kishiar, looking down at the paper, did not seem particularly displeased. His demeanor was surprisingly calm, especially for a descendant of the imperial family who should have been most shocked by this story.

“It seems you’re not too surprised, Commander.”

“Really? I thought I was quite shocked. If I seem unaffected, it’s probably because I’ve had similar thoughts since I was a child.”

There was no need to ask what he meant, as the man soon clarified.

“Listen. The founding Emperor of Orr, celebrated for receiving the blood of the Sun God and wielding a divine sword to prevent great destruction and establish the nation, is a famous legend.”

“Yes.”

“But how can one be certain of inheriting the god’s blood when the god has never appeared?”

Yuder was silent for a moment before finally speaking.

“In the temple… isn’t there something like holy fire? The incarnation of the god depicted…”

“Officially, it’s said that the artists received ‘special revelations’ when depicting the incarnation of the god. But in reality, all those artists used the imperial family of the time as models. I’ve often been told I resemble the god’s incarnation, likely due to this influence. We

don’t know what the holy fires were like before the great destruction, as the first depictions in history are from after the establishment of Orr.”

“I didn’t know that.”

“It’s natural to be unaware. Who would dare discuss such things?”

After saying this, Kishiar stroked his chin and lifted the corners of his lips.

“Since childhood, I’ve been curious about this. Every time I went to the Grand Temple, I troubled the Pope by insisting on more solid evidence that I was a descendant of a god. After awakening my divine power, I’ve spoken with many clerics about it, but none could give me a satisfying answer.”

The story of the founder of the Orr imperial family receiving the god’s blood is not in the scriptures. Yet, everyone believes it. The belief itself is as good as an answer. Denying an answer that is already evident is meaningless.

The priests had said so, but their words failed to convince young Kishiar.

“To me, both magic and divine powers weren’t much different. It wasn’t a power awakened due to fervent belief in a deity. There are imperial family members like me who have awakened divine power, but in fact, more royals have not. Then, does that mean they are not descendants of the imperial bloodline blessed by the god’s blood? Not necessarily.”

Silence followed.

“Do you remember the story I mentioned before? About how mages debated that the presence or absence of divine power

couldn’t prove the existence of a god.”

The very thoughts Yuder had just entertained were now echoed in Kishiar’s words.

“I remember.”

“They argued that greater piety doesn’t necessarily translate into more potent divine power, and that even a priest who commits evil deeds can continue to use that power until death. If there were a god, that shouldn’t be possible. Some extremists even claimed that divine power was no different from magic power.”

Kishiar laughed, recalling how those who made such bold claims were denounced to the temple and subjected to a religious trial.

“During my curiosity about the divine lineage, I found these debates quite intriguing. In fact, if their arguments hold, even the Divine Sword Orr could be considered just an exceptional magic artifact.”

The idea of the Divine Sword Orr as a mere magic tool was more audacious than the ancient mages’ claims. Yuder began to consider whether he should block the surrounding area to prevent their conversation from being overheard.

“Undoubtedly, the Divine Sword has a mystique that allows it to express something akin to a self-awareness. But isn’t that similar to the animated armor knight in the Deluma Palace? If the knight is moved by magic, then the sword is moved by divine power. They’re quite similar, aren’t they?”

Yuder was silent for a moment before responding.

“I’m not well-versed in either field, so it’s difficult for me to comment, but your words seem reasonable, Commander.”

“I’m grateful to have the fortune of conversing with someone who doesn’t dismiss what I say as madness simply because I said it.”

Kishiar blinked both eyes in quick succession.

“I may have delved into my old stories, but the point that Blake Van Tain was trying to make here is singular. The legendary tales and mystical powers we’ve long considered profound and grand might, upon closer inspection, not be so different from what we know today.”

“Today being”

“Yes. Like how our world changed completely just two years ago due to a stone that fell from the sky. That’s a fitting example.”

As Kishiar added this to his previous statements, the message he intended to convey began to crystallize in Yuder’s mind.

‘The Founding Emperor… legends… scriptures, God… and the Awakeners.’

The First Duke Tain had talked about witnessing his father’s deeds being exaggerated into legends. It was an easy concept to grasp for Yuder. Many similar incidents had occurred whenever he displayed his immense power.

Of course, in his case, the tales were often inflated in a terrifying and fearsome direction. Ridiculous rumors had abounded about the secrets behind the extraordinary strength of the Cavalry Commander Yudrain Aile like deriving power from consuming a child’s liver daily or being a demon’s offspring.

‘Perhaps, if such rumors had gone uncorrected for a few hundred years, people might have come to believe I truly was such a being.’

This led to the contemplation that perhaps the tale of the Founding Emperor inheriting the blood of god was similarly fabricated. Attaching the narrative of being ‘someone who, upon closer inspection, inherited divine blood’ to a person of great accomplishments, as a form of admiration and understanding, wasn’t a difficult task.

All words, after all, were a matter of how they were applied.

‘Though it’s just a thought, it does feel dangerously plausible.’

The more he considered it, the more dangerously sensible it seemed.

Perhaps future generations would perceive the tale of an Awakener emerging from a stone that suddenly fell from the sky as akin to the legend of a mage born from a magic spring. If Kishiar, often praised as an incarnation of the divine, were to be remembered in history, it wouldn’t be strange to attach the epithet of the reincarnation of the Founding Emperor.

But who in that distant future could definitively prove that these added narratives weren’t the reality?

‘The First Duke Tain, who authored those writings, must have observed such processes and thus speculated that the existence of the scriptures might also be the result of a similar evolution.’

A faint shiver ran through him. Stories that once seemed distant and far off now felt alarmingly close.

“The scriptures record fragments of stories from a very long time ago, well before the Great Destruction. Although they are covered in all sorts of unrealistic metaphors, if one peels away all of that and thinks about it… The existence of Messenger Orhe, who is said to have proved the existence of the Sun God on this land, might not

have been so different from that of Luma, the first Archmage who established magic on this land.”

Just as mages were persecuted and had to prove their magic when it first appeared, the first priests in the scriptures had a similar experience. The miracles attributed to Orhe were not much different from those performed by the Archmage.

“At the very end of the text, Blake Van Tain wrote this.”

Kishiar showed Yuder the last part of the paper.

”*Perhaps my spiritual father, who took the scriptures and left this place, had already entertained the same thoughts as I. If I were a bit healthier, I might have traveled south. But now, I cannot…*”

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Chapter 645

Yuder reflexively thought of the southern part of the Empire when he heard ‘south,’ but soon realized that the writer might have been referring to a region even farther south.

“By south, do you mean… possibly the area south of the desert?” Yuder pondered.

“I believe it’s highly probable. Right after the Great Destruction, the number of survivors across the continent was even fewer than the current population of the Empire’s capital. Back then, the concept of countries and borders was different from now, and the current border system was not established until the reign of the Third Emperor.”

Thus, the ‘south’ referred to by the First Duke of Tain, Blake Van Tain, was likely the true southern part of the continent, south of the desert. Kishiar seemed to agree with this assessment.

“That makes sense.”

“But why specifically mention the south? That remains a mystery.”

Even Kishiar, who was knowledgeable in many fields, couldn’t be sure about the implications of this reference.

The final conclusion of one who began researching the origins of monsters to find a way to manipulate time was this mysterious ‘south.’ What had he hoped to find there?

“Did Luma, who had left the Empire much earlier with the scriptures, also head south?” Yuder wondered.

Prince Ejain had mentioned a blind sage in Nelarn, presumed to be Luma. If it was indeed Luma, how had he become blind and ended up in Nelarn after leaving the Empire? Was Nelarn the end of his journey?

“So, did Luma eventually discover a way to turn back time?” pondered Yuder.

“We should ask Nathan about the south when he returns,” Kishiar suggested.

Yuder, deep in thought, lifted his gaze.

“Does he know much about the history of the Southern Lands?”

“More than us, surely. Nathan’s original family were ‘Masha’ in the Southern Lands, protectors of tribes… akin to knights in the Empire,” someone explained.

This was new information to Yuder.

Kishiar briefly elaborated with a smile, “Long ago, there was a significant armed conflict between the Empire’s south and the Southern Lands. It’s now known as the Sand War. Although the Empire emerged victorious, there were several minor clashes with the Southern Lands over the years. Nathan’s parents were captured as prisoners of war in a conflict that occurred about a decade ago.”

Yuder remembered hearing about the Sand War from Gakane. Even after General Jureli led the Empire to victory, the conflict hadn’t completely ceased.

“Nathan was born to those imprisoned parents and was a small boy doing menial work in the southern palace. He never showed fear, a remarkable lad. Had I not been recuperating there from a summer cold, I might never have met him.”

Yuder recalled Nathan Zuckerman recounting his meeting with the Second Prince Kishiar, who was then a convalescing child at the southern palace.

The perspectives of their shared story differed, but what mattered was how that meeting changed Nathan Zuckerman's life. From a slave servant to a noble prince's attendant, a friend, and finally a member of Duke Peletta's staff and the knighthood.

The boy, once deemed too small, had grown into a swordmaster of formidable stature, no longer to be casually referred to as 'small.'

"Nathan didn't spend much time with his parents, but he heard quite a bit about life in the Southern Lands and the stories passed down there," Kishiar relayed. "Perhaps there's something in those stories that might resonate with this discussion."

Not long after, Nathan Zuckerman, having finished chopping firewood and repairing a broken door, returned and responded to what he had heard.

"There is something that comes to mind now that I've heard this," Nathan said.

"Really?"

"The people of the south refer to themselves as 'Children of the Moon,' or 'Stars.' According to their legends, long ago, these children were the rulers of the entire world. They were great warriors who wielded sacred swords and bows, slicing through evil and conquering death itself, accompanied by wolves that returned from the dead and owls with the ability to see through darkness. They maintained peace for a long time," Nathan recounted, as if sifting through ancient memories.

"But that peace was shattered by the greed of many, and the warriors could no longer wield their sacred swords and bows. The

tale ends with a lesson against greed," he concluded.

"Swords and bows," Kishiar mused, a meaningful glint in his eyes.

"The Empire and nations north of the desert may not favor this tale, but there's a credible theory that the origin of aura-using swordsmanship actually began in the Southern Lands," Kishiar noted.

"Yes, the Southern people believe that. They say that all weapons in the world originated from these sacred swords and bows, a fact known even to their children. I've heard tales of those who could wield aura with bows in the past," Nathan added, though admitting he had never seen it firsthand. Yuder thought of the members of the Cavalry who skillfully used aura-like powers with bows, suggesting these stories weren't entirely baseless.

Kishiar seemed to share this sentiment.

"Look at it this way, these tales resemble the saga of the Archmage Luma, the origin of Messenger Orhe's divine power, and the story of the sacred sword and bow warriors who overcame adversities and revealed mystical powers," Kishiar observed, counting off on his fingers.

"And one more thing. There's a common thread in these stories, related to something that Duke Blake Van Tain was desperately curious about. Do you see what it is?"

Yuder nodded slowly, having noticed another commonality in Nathan Zuckerman's stories.

A dry voice whispered between slowly parting lips, "The returned from death."

"That's right," Kishiar agreed.

“Consider that these three stories represent the origins of magic, divinity, and aura. Each of them involves a figure returned from death. Orhe regenerated torn limbs, escaping death. Luma’s case is still unclear, but it seems there was someone similar around him. And the warriors of the sacred sword and bow had a wolf that returned after killing death.”

Kishiar lightly shook his four folded fingers, then spoke, “With such a commonality, wouldn’t it be a reason enough for Duke Blake Van Tain to have wanted to travel to the south? That’s what I’m thinking.”

Yuder agreed, and as he did, a complex mix of emotions, indescribable and overwhelming, coursed through him, sending a shiver down his spine.

Magic. Divinity. Aura.

These three powers, and the strength of an Awakener like himself, did not pale in comparison.

Yuder Aile, returned from death.

Could he dismiss as mere coincidence the recurring commonalities between the ancient past and the present, as recounted in scriptures, legends, and old records?

It’s hard to see it as mere chance, Yuder thought to himself.

Suddenly, he felt as if he were cast alone into a vast ocean, unable to see even an inch ahead, confronting something unfathomable.

The reins he believed he was holding, moving forward, might have been connected to something much larger and unknown all along.

Seeking escape from this vague unease, Yuder turned his gaze to Kishiar, who, like him, was lost in deep thought. Without exchanging a single word, Yuder found surprising solace and comfort in Kishiar's presence, his mind settling down.

Yes. Nothing has gone wrong so far. If I come to understand more about the past, I might learn why I returned and in which direction I should move forward.

When he first arrived in this village, he had only expected to find some remnants of the First Duke of Tain. But, as he delved deeper, he discovered that this place held more profound and astonishing information than he had previously known.

I haven't found the complete answer yet, but knowing this much is already a significant gain. There's much more to discover moving forward.

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Chapter 646

The part I had shown was mostly focused on the latter half, but it seemed that there were more detailed opinions about monsters resembling animals in the front section.”

“I’ll take a closer look at that when we arrive at the southern branch.” After the conversation had ended, Kishiar stated this. The bundle of papers, written by the First Duke of Tain, was rolled up in leather and tucked away in the Commander’s luggage, safe from any intrusion.

The three spent the night and, as dawn broke, they hastily departed the small village, setting their course southward. Their journey was slightly delayed due to deviating from their path twice and spending a period in heat, but this was no issue for them.

They were capable individuals who could adjust their speed of travel at will.

“We’ll be arriving at Charloin soon.”

“Yes. At this pace, we’ll soon pass through the Red Twilight Gate, the pride of the southern region’s largest trading city.”

Kishiar shaded his eyes with his hand, gazing intently at the distant, faint landscape.

The southern branch of the Cavalry was to be established in Charloin, the largest maritime trading city in the southern part of the Empire. The lord governing Charloin, a cadet branch of the fourth great ducal family, Herne, was not particularly welcoming of this. However, Yuder, aware of this, still strongly advocated for its construction there.

The reason was straightforward. It was because of the events that were soon to unfold there.

‘While the western Tainu gains profit through land trade with the western nations, southern Charloin connects the north and south through maritime trade. It’s an ideal place for the secret influx of foreign cultures, and therefore…’

A port city overflowing with those who could simply flee by boat after committing crimes. Charloin was a perfect breeding ground for illegal activities. In his previous life, this environment had flourished, blossoming into a hub of crime.

The pleasure-loving nobility called it a city of delight and happiness, losing themselves in its allure. Regardless of status, many succumbed to drug addiction and became ensnared in the illegal fighting rings, losing their way in life.

In his previous life, the southern branch of the Cavalry, due to the vehement opposition of these nobles, was initially established in a different city. This caused delays in their operations. What use was it to arrive a step late in matters of security? Without any friendly assistance, the branch alone struggled under these worst-case conditions.

‘But this time will be different.’

The opposition to the establishment of the Cavalry branch was the same as in his previous life. In fact, Kishiar had heard through interim reports that the backlash was even stronger.

However, this time, they had the legitimate and healthy Emperor Keilusa backing them, surrounded by numerous allies. Considering the key provided by these allies, now resting in his luggage awaiting its use, nothing felt too challenging.

‘In fact… the priority at the southern branch is more this matter than recruiting for the Cavalry.’

Yuder revisited his plans for the southern region before his arrival.

First, upon arrival, he would unhesitatingly force those opposing the construction of the Cavalry branch to shut their mouths with a decisive fist holding the key.

Second, he would seek out the budding illegal fighting rings and drug trades, uprooting them completely and burning them to ashes.

Thirdly, as a final step, they would track down the traces of southern merchants they had missed in the west and simultaneously deal with the adjustments to the Star of Nagran.

‘Perfect.’

In reality, accomplishing all these tasks within a few days might seem impossible. But hadn’t they been preparing all this time to make it possible?

Yuder glanced sideways at the man striding effortlessly beside him.

“Hmm?”

Somehow noticing the silent gaze, Kishiar immediately turned his head. Their eyes met, and his softened into a warm smile.

An indistinct face that no one could guess the identity of, altered by magic. His hair, changed to a brown hue.

Yet, he was none other than Duke Kishiar La Orr, the Commander of the Cavalry, trusted by all its members and, most of all, by Yuder.

With him by his side, Yuder felt assured, as it had always been so far.

—

Charloin was always famous for its pleasant weather. The temperature never dropped too low, and with its ‘Eternal Sapphire’ sea, it was also renowned as a resort destination.

In this giant trading city that also served as a resort, several men and women with somewhat intimidated expressions quietly made their appearance.

“Dagon. Around this street… is this where the Cavalry branch is located?”

“Of course, it is. Didn’t you ask the same thing when we arrived?”

“But every time we asked, people looked at us as if we were strange… I just wanted to make sure.”

A particularly anxious young boy prodded Dagon, the man he addressed, who turned to him.

“Jack, listen to me. No one here knows that we came from the Star of Nagran’s base. We’re not fleeing; we chose to come here. You know that, right?”

“Uh, yeah.”

“You’ve seen the letter from Ragnar who left earlier after hearing Robel’s advice. If we just get there, we won’t have to live like before. If we pass the test… even if not, just securing a contract will allow us to work and live properly.”

Silence fell.

Upon hearing the names Robel and Ragnar, those who were anxious clenched their lips, their expressions firming with resolve.

They were Awakeners, former colleagues of Robel at the western branch and survivors from the now-defunct Star of Nagran's western base. Not all were from the western base; some were from the southern base, but their purpose for the long journey was the same.

They had left the chaotic Star of Nagran, aspiring to join the Cavalry.

Had they left the base earlier, they might have already undergone the Cavalry's enlistment test, but there had been a reason for their delay. Doubting Robel's recommendation, they had divided themselves into two groups.

The braver and more skilled advance team went to Charloin first to take the Cavalry's test. After receiving their communication, the follow-up team left the desert base and arrived here as the second group.

It was never easy for several people to leave a place they had been part of at once. But desperation made it all possible.

"Ragnar… he passed, didn't he?"

"Yes. So, we can do it too."

The Awakeners looked at each other, steeling their resolve.

However, upon finally finding the Cavalry's southern branch after asking around, their firm resolve faced the brink of collapse.

"There have been already five complaints about loud noises coming from here today. Five! Do you remember what we decided to do if there was one more complaint? Either pay a fine or leave!"

“The Southern Sapphire Mage Union will never tolerate any group that seeks to tarnish the history of Chaloin! We will protest with a firm resolve here to ensure the safety of Chaloin!”

“Resolve! Commitment! Absolute! Protest!”

“What in the world is happening…?”

The building, seemingly an old structure barely refurbished to hang a sign, appeared acceptable. After all, it was marked ‘Cavalry’.

However, instead of candidates for the test, the front was filled with haughty mages in elegant robes and stern-faced officials, looking as if not even a needle could penetrate their seriousness.

“Is this… the Cavalry branch? May I… enter?”

“Are you here to register for the member recruitment test?”

At that moment, someone in a black uniform, looking extremely tired, noticed them while standing with crossed arms in a corner. The Awakeners from the Star of Nagran hesitantly approached him.

“Yes, we are…”

“Right now, as you can see, the main entrance is chaotic, so please use the side door.”

“The side door?”

“If you knock on the wall right behind where I’m standing like this, it will open.”

The Cavalry member tapped behind him where he leaned. Astonishingly, the wall became semi-transparent, allowing a hand to pass through.

The Awakeners from the Star of Nagran realized that this was a creation of someone's power and widened their eyes. Their own base had been protected with various devices to prevent easy access, but they had never managed to make the entrance invisible, even when it was right beside them.

Whoever created this was indeed a remarkable Awakener.

They sneakily entered through the wall, avoiding the eyes of the mages and officials. Just as they were all about to pass through, the tired Cavalry member suddenly cried out in delight, "Ah, there! Finally, theyre here!" However, as the door closed behind them, they could not hear who had arrived.

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Chapter 647

Utter Chaos

A complete mess.

That was the first thought that struck Yuder upon arriving at the Charloin's Cavalry branch headquarters.

"Those who threaten Charloin, withdraw at once!"

"Back off!"

"There have been complaints about the building lease… and the noise!"

"Doesn't the Cavalry branch have someone in charge? How can they expect to operate like this! I don't know about other places, but here in the south, they can't get away with such nonsense!"

People from every walk of life had gathered, crowding the front of the branch building, creating a tumultuous scene. It was evident at a glance: mages from various parts of the south, local residents, and frustrated administrators all converged in a chaotic mix.

It was so crowded that the Awakeners, who had come to take their tests under normal circumstances, were nowhere to be seen.

'I knew there was significant opposition, but this is worse than I expected. The members inside the branch must have had a tough time holding out.'

"Hmm. It seems noisier now than when we first started building the main headquarters of the Cavalry on the Imperial Knights' territory."

While Yuder quietly assessed the situation, Kishiar, with his arms crossed, looked at the protesting crowd with a smile and spoke.

“It feels like our Cavalry has really grown, doesn’t it? Quite overwhelming, indeed.”

“Is that so?”

“Of course. In fact, facing this scene now seems overdue.”

In the east, they had already established a base in the territory of Zachlis, whom they already knew, so although there was some resentment from neighboring territories, they hadn’t faced direct opposition. In the west, they had preemptively laid the groundwork in Tainu, so there was no one to oppose the construction of the branch there.

However, the south was different. It was a completely new area where direct opposition was inevitable.

Only upon seeing the genuinely intrigued expression on the man’s face did Yuder’s furrowed brows relax.

“Yuder! It is Yuder, right?”

At that moment, a voice filled with joy pierced through the noisy crowd. A burly man, resembling a bear, wearing a snug uniform with a long hood, rushed over with a laughing face.

“Kurga.”

He was one of the members who had shared a room with Yuder when they first joined the Cavalry. Although he wasn’t as close to Yuder as Gakane or Kanna, it wasn’t accurate to say they had no friendship at all.

Kurga, who had been more distant than others in the past, now approached Yuder with a friendly face, vigorously patting his shoulder and sharing a hearty embrace.

“We’ve all been waiting for you for a long time! It was a long wait. We did receive a letter from the Commander saying it would be slightly delayed, but still… Oh, by the way, where is the Commander?”

“He’s right here.”

“Ah!”

Startled by the sudden voice from behind, Kurga almost fell backward but managed to regain his balance.

“Weren’t you supposed to come in disguise? What’s with this appearance…”

“I just used a magic tool, no need to be so surprised.”

“Ah… Ah, I see. That’s one way to do it.”

Other members of the branch, who had initially been startled by Kishiar’s magically altered appearance, reacted in various ways. But Kurga’s reaction was uniquely slow.

‘He was always a beat behind the other members even when we were in the capital.’

However, Kurga’s strength lay in his bear-like, solid, and slow demeanor. He was, to put it nicely, steadfast, or to put it bluntly, indifferent to the point of ignoring insults. He possessed a personality that was rarely swayed by external influences.

Due to this, Yuder had entrusted Kurga with the temporary leadership of the Southern branch, believing in this very trait of his

character.

‘It seems that my choice was indeed a good one.’

Even amidst the protestors surrounding them, Kurga showed no change in expression. Neither the insults nor the noise seemed to penetrate his ears or eyes.

He was truly the ideal choice to be stationed in the region where the most opposition was anticipated.

“Has this protest been ongoing since the branch was established?”

“Yes, but it’s only recently that the number of people has increased so much. We followed the Commander’s orders to ignore such noises and just continued with our recruitment efforts, which only led to more people joining the protest day by day.”

When Kishiar first received reports of severe opposition to the construction of the branch in the South, he instructed the members there to show no reaction other than what was outlined in the ‘official response manual’ sent from the headquarters.

And Kurga, along with the other members dispatched to the South, followed these orders impeccably. No matter how much they were provoked, they never lost their temper and steadfastly stuck to the official responses provided by Kishiar, not uttering a word more.

This approach, difficult for many to maintain, was also the best way to infuriate the opposition, if one could manage it.

‘And the result of that is the chaos we see today.’

Now, Yuder understood why the protestors were particularly enraged, their eyes bloodshot with anger. Who could have imagined

that they, who looked down on these mere commoners, would be so blatantly ignored?

“You’ve done well. You held on until we arrived.”

“Hm? Oh, it wasn’t difficult. Some of the others said they were getting tired, but I was fine. Compared to the extreme summer training you had us do, this was nothing.”

Kurga grinned.

“So, are we going inside to rest before starting work?”

“No.”

Kurga tilted his head at Yuder’s firm response.

“Then what?”

“I’d like you to pick out three people who came here first and most frequently from those present here.”

“Hmm?”

A short while later.

The Awakeners from the Star of Nagran, who were busy filling out their application forms with the help of Cavalry members, were startled by a sudden thudding vibration echoing from somewhere.

“Yikes. What’s that?!”

“It’s not an earthquake, is it?”

“Look over there! The door is opening!”

Someone exclaimed in a remarkably bright voice.

The Awakeners turned to see the branch's main gate, which had been firmly shut until now, smoothly opening. Despite the winter season, the bright and dazzling sunlight of Charloin streamed in through the door, casting the silhouette of someone in backlight.

Initially, they thought the protestors had finally broken through the door, but it was not so. A man with dark hair, seemingly untouched by the bright sunlight, stepped into the branch with a calm yet unwavering stride.

The applicants, unable to discern his identity due to his plain black traveler's clothes instead of a uniform, were puzzled. However, the existing members of the branch recognized him immediately.

"Wow! He's finally here!"

"Now we can finally be relieved!"

Several members of the branch rushed towards the man, cheering. The member helping with the applications also quickly wore a relieved and confident smile.

"What, who is that person?"

As the bewildered Awakeners from the Star of Nagran muttered among themselves, others followed the man with black hair into the building. Two of them were tall, but their features were oddly indistinct and hard to recognize. However, the individuals who entered after the black-haired man invited them in with a "Please, come inside," were distinctly different.

The very people who had been fervently protesting outside just moments ago now entered the branch, their faces ashen and dragging their feet. As they glanced at the man with the black hair, their expressions were a mix of fear and anger, almost blended together.

“Now that we’re in a place more suitable for a proper discussion, shall we continue our earlier conversation?”

The man with black hair spoke first, his voice steady, slow, and cold, addressing the protestors. Their faces contorted in dismay, but they did not voice any opposition to the man.

‘What in the world is going on…’

The Awakeners from the Star of Nagran, mouths agape, only then noticed that the noise of the protest outside had abruptly ceased, despite the presence of people still lingering around. How could it have become so quiet?

Who exactly was this person?

Amidst the rising questions, Dagon, the de facto leader of the group who had brought them this far, gathered his courage and spoke to the Cavalry member handling the registrations.

“Excuse me. Who is that person? Could he be the Cavalry Commander? We come from a region near the desert in the South, so…”

Though he added more than necessary, perhaps out of fear of appearing suspicious, fortunately, the Cavalry member didn’t seem to mind and chuckled.

“No? Ha ha. I see, the applicants wouldn’t know. That person is…”

“The desert?”

At that moment, the man with the black hair, as if having heard the conversation from afar, turned his head.

The moment Dagon’s eyes met the terrifyingly black pupils peeking through the man’s hair, he recognized who he was.

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Chapter 648

Right at that time, the man with black hair turned his head upon hearing a voice from afar.

At the moment their eyes met, Dagon recognized him through the terrifyingly dark pupils beyond the locks of hair.

‘That man…! He’s the one I encountered in the Great Sarain Forest!’

Memories of the events just before the Western Base disappeared flooded Dagon’s mind. There had been a time when a strange monster appeared in the Great Sarain Forest, growing increasingly larger and undying despite the attacks.

Dagon, a member of the attacking squad tasked with protecting the village, had not known then that the creature grew with each assault, rendering all their desperate efforts futile. While debating whether to return to the village for an emergency evacuation, a mysterious Awakener suddenly appeared.

Cease your attacks and step back. I will handle this from here.

Leaving behind words akin to a suicide wish, the man bravely faced the monster alone, proving his words true. Ultimately, he led the monster to a cliff’s edge and triumphantly defeated it.

Afterward, Dagon had to urgently close the Western Base and relocate south, hence never encountering the man again. Learning that he was a member of the Cavalry visiting the Great Sarain Forest, Dagon had shuddered at the thought that he might have been captured.

But the incredible, almost inhuman strength displayed by the Cavalry's man, making the vast Great Sarain Forest seem to respond and judge under his command, remained an unforgettable scene in Dagon's dreams.

In fact, this memory played a significant role in Dagon's decision to apply to the Cavalry, despite having the option to go elsewhere after escaping the Southern Base. He suspected that most of his fellow attacking squad who had escaped with him had chosen the same path due to that day's events.

Now, that unforgettable face stood before Dagon once more.

'Here, at the Cavalry's branch, it's natural… But now he'll know who I am…!'

As Dagon's body tensed in a mix of fear and uncertainty, the man's eyes narrowed. Approaching them, a palpable tension rose among Dagon and the other Awakeners.

"Did you come from the desert?"

"Ah… Yes, yes."

Dagon barely managed to respond, his voice strained and barely audible in his overwhelming anxiety.

'What if he recognizes us and orders our immediate arrest? But I haven't done anything wrong then or now… But if he discovers we're from the Star of Nagran, the others said they'd kill us all… But now that we've left there… Are we safe? What should I do?'

As these thoughts swirled chaotically, Dagon felt his limbs twitch involuntarily and cold sweat bead on his skin. Then, the black-haired man let out a short breath, a sound that might have been mistaken for laughter if not for his unchanging expression.

You’ve come from quite far. Are you all together?

“Yes… Yes.”

The fact that so many Awakeners knew each other before even applying to join the Cavalry was unusual. Moreover, their collective decision to apply was even more extraordinary.

However, Dagon was too overwhelmed to contemplate further. He failed to notice the subtle emotion that flickered deep within the eyes of his interlocutor upon hearing his response.

“It seems so. Understood. The first test can be taken immediately upon application. It should not be too difficult for you, so there’s no need to be overly anxious.”

“Uh… Uhh, oh, yes. Not too difficult, right, yes.”

Dagon blurted out a response, utterly unaware of what he was even saying.

“I would like to observe, but I have duties to attend to right now. I hope you all achieve good results.”

With those words, the man, having briefly and neatly excused himself, nodded and turned away. Dagon watched him leave in a daze, finally snapping back to reality only after the man had completely disappeared.

‘What?’

Did he not recognize me?! Amid a mix of relief and an inexplicable sense of loss, a Cavalry member assisting with the application process smiled and spoke.

“Wow. It’s rare for Yuder to initiate conversation with someone. The fact he mentioned passing the first test so casually suggests he

sees potential in your abilities.”

“Yuder…? Is that his name?”

A colleague beside Dagon cautiously inquired.

“Yes. I thought you would have recognized the name… Haven’t you heard? He’s famous for single-handedly defeating a massive monster in the Great Sarain Forest. Yuder Aile, the Cavalry’s top fighter and assistant to the Cavalry Commander. I thought he became quite well-known after receiving a title that’s nearly impossible for a commoner to attain…”

“…”

Dagon’s colleagues, still bewildered, finally seemed to grasp something, swallowing hard. It appeared they had just realized that the man they had encountered was the same monstrous figure who had transformed the landscape of the Great Sarain Forest.

‘Well, it makes sense. No one here but me was part of the attack squad until the end…’

Dagon sighed deeply. As he was still recovering from the shock, the member in charge of the applications continued to chatter excitedly.

“Yuder is really something else. I don’t know how many of you will become our colleagues, but if you join the Cavalry, remember well what Yuder says. You might think I’m exaggerating, but his words have never been wrong. He’s the pride and spirit of the Cavalry! If he spoke positively about your first test, it means he’s already recognized your skills.”

“Uh… Haha. Hardly. He must’ve been just saying that because we’re applicants…”

“Praise? He doesn’t do that. He just states facts.”

“…”

“That’s the spirit of the Cavalry!”

The member grinned and gave a thumbs up.

It seemed he believed that one couldn’t join without understanding ‘the spirit of the Cavalry.’

‘What exactly… is this spirit of the Cavalry?’

Dagon couldn’t grasp it at all. Watching the member, who seemed to trust the Cavalry’s assistant more than the Commander himself, Dagon briefly doubted whether this was alright, but eventually, he chose not to comment and let it pass.

Shortly after completing their application forms, they all passed the first test with ease, creating a new legend within the ranks about ‘Yuder Aile, who could discern an applicant’s success upon first sight.’ This unfolded just an hour later.

—

Yuder paused and looked back while walking down the corridor of the building. Kishiar and Nathan Zuckerman, disguised with magic tools, and Kurga seemed fine, but the three protest participants, who had been dragging their feet as if on death’s door, stopped in their tracks, startled by his gaze.

Without uttering a word, the mere meeting of their eyes had them panic as if facing their doom, evoking a sense of disdain in Yuder.

‘These faint-hearted souls, so easily startled by the slightest disturbance, had the audacity to challenge the Cavalry.’

What he had done just before entering the branch was quite straightforward.

He had asked Kurga to identify the three who had been most active and frequent in the protests. These individuals were singled out a mage, an administrator, and a common citizen, all vehemently condemning the Cavalry at the forefront of their respective groups.

‘It’s obvious, considering they spend their days and nights here protesting instead of doing their actual jobs.’

These three were specifically chosen to represent and voice the hostile intentions of their groups against the Cavalry.

Until now, the Cavalry had deliberately refrained from responding to their provocations, maintaining an attitude of ‘we’re just following orders already approved by those above.’ They only communicated cooperation recommendations from the Emperor, the High Minister, and the Court Mage Office, as per the law.

However, if they were the sort to quietly back down with just such ‘recommendations,’ the situation wouldn’t have escalated to this point. Those who had powerful people behind them did not seriously listen to the recommendations of a powerless, reclusive Emperor, a High Minister engaged only in bureaucracy without real power, and a Court Mage Office far less influential than the Pearl Tower.

Until now, these individuals, backed by powerful entities, had managed to live without any problems.

But not anymore.

Yuder exchanged a glance with Kishiar, then stepped forward towards the protesters, ready to speak.

“The Commander of the Cavalry, whom you’ve been so eager to confront, is here now. Let’s have a serious discussion about what

your grievances are.”

Naturally, no one believed his words.

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Chapter 649

Previously outside the entrance

“What nonsense is this!”

“The person in charge, you say? This place is no stage for a green youth like you, a mere commoner. If you’ve lost your mind, step down gracefully!”

The reaction to Yuder, who stood alone before the protesting crowd filling the front of the branch, was explosively heated. Not a single soul believed in Yuder’s words; the consensus was that a madman had appeared, spouting nonsense.

Unfazed by the numerous jeers and protests, Yuder didn’t even blink. As he slightly turned his gaze, Kurga, meeting his eyes, opened his mouth and shouted loudly.

“This man here is indeed the person in charge of the Cavalry! Haven’t you all been clamoring for the person in charge to come forward? If so, what seems to be the problem?”

“What?”

The crowd, initially like a swarm of bees with their jeers, recoiled slightly at Kurga’s words. He was somewhat familiar to them, and he was properly clad in the Cavalry uniform. But soon after, the brief silence was shattered by roars twice as loud as before.

“If he really is from the Cavalry, it’s even more ludicrous! After all the disregard, is this young man, swollen with arrogance, their answer a mere scapegoat?”

“The Emperor’s direct subordinates are a disgrace!”

“Indeed. If he truly is from the Cavalry, then present some evidence! His attire looks like it’s come from nowhere what are we supposed to believe?”

“Since when did the Cavalry Commander have such filthy black hair? I’ve never heard of Duke Peletta’s hair turning black!”

“…”

Yuder intently watched the faces of the loudest agitators. As expected, the three individuals Kurga had pointed out were the main instigators.

They seemed to think that this black-haired youth would soon burst into tears and retreat, overwhelmed by the barrage of insults. But Yuder did the exact opposite.

“Laughing?”

In the midst of silence, Yuder slightly lifted the corners of his lips into a smile.

His eyes weren’t smiling at all, but the pale thin lips, stretched into a long, eerie grin, made several people weakly sense doubt and unease at that moment.

“If you can’t believe my words, I have no choice but to prove it. I am a member of the Cavalry and a person in charge worthy of dialogue.”

With those words, Yuder suddenly stepped forward, lightly stomping his foot on the ground.

Thump!

A seemingly light step.

Yet, the repercussion resonated throughout the vicinity.

The vibration, starting from Yuder's foot, spread far and wide, causing buildings to shiver as if struck by an earthquake, and branches from the trees along the walls to break and fall.

The inevitable result was the people, unable to stand on the trembling ground, screaming and sprawling.

"Ah!"

"Good heavens, save us!"

"Mercy!"

After a wave of various screams swept through, those covered in dirt lifted their heads, their faces smeared with terror.

Yuder, standing firmly and upright, quietly tilted his head and asked.

"Just now, I saw a centipede crawling at my feet, and for safety, I caught it… Is this level of power sufficient to converse with you? Or is it still inadequate?"

Indeed, beneath Yuder's foot lay a flattened centipede corpse. But that was just an excuse. Everyone with eyes could feel that what this seemingly calm madman really wanted to flatten was not the centipede, but the protesters present.

With eyes as dark and ominous as the abyss, Yuder swept his gaze over everyone's faces, indifferent as if he were merely looking at the crushed bug under his foot. The chilling intensity of his stare sent shivers down the spines of several onlookers.

"Where in the world did this madman come from…!"

"You… no, who exactly are you? How can someone like you…!"

A man dressed in a fine administrative uniform, his voice trembling, tried to retreat, shifting uneasily, after locking eyes with Yuder. Yuder looked down at him with a cold detachment and introduced himself.

“I am Yuder Aile, the assistant to the Commander of the Cavalry.”

In truth, this conversation should have taken place when Yuder first stepped forward.

It was remarkable how, initially, not a single question was asked, not even his name was inquired, until they experienced his fiery display. Yuder chose not to point out their sudden politeness.

‘Typical of such people.’

The crowd might have been frightened by Yuder’s display of power, but it wasn’t the sole reason for their newfound respect. The real reason they were cowering was Yuder’s unabashed audacity, even after such a wild act.

In their minds, only a ‘truly high-ranking person’ could behave so recklessly and still remain impudent. It seemed they only pretended to listen and treat someone as an equal after being shown their place.

‘But still… seeing them all prostrate like this is quite a sight.’

Unbeknownst to them, Duke Peletta, the leader of the Cavalry, Kishiar, was also standing among them. Yuder allowed a cold smile to slip as he observed those who had knelt before Kishiar.

That smile sent a chill through the protesters, draining them of the courage to speak further.

“Now then… the one in the red administrative robe, the one beside in the green mage’s robe, and over here in the grey clothes. It

seems we might now be able to have a proper conversation. What do you think?”

With that, the entire confrontation came to an end.

Yuder confidently led the three stunned individuals into the branch, his tone shifting to a more formal register as soon as the situation was resolved. This change only heightened the protesters’ sense of dread.

“Please, take a seat over here.”

Kurga, showing some quick thinking, led the three to a space for them to sit side by side. Anticipating that Yuder would sit across from them, they tensed up, but their confusion grew when a man with a vague appearance and brown hair took his seat before Yuder.

‘Who is he?’

Throughout the commotion caused by Yuder, this man had simply stood back, arms crossed, watching. Seemingly unimportant, his sudden forwardness was disconcerting.

‘Is he also a member of the Cavalry? Or someone else entirely?’

Regardless of whether they surreptitiously glanced or wondered about the identity of Kishiar, who had altered his appearance, Yuder didn’t sit until Kishiar had comfortably found his place. Only then did Yuder take his seat beside him.

As soon as he sat, the atmosphere froze over once again, like a lake in the northern winter.

“Before we begin, I’ve already introduced myself. Now, I’d like to hear each of your names.”

Ordinarily, a few pleasantries would be exchanged before starting a conversation, but Yuder had no intention of extending such courtesies. His cold demeanor in demanding their names first left the three protesters unable to hide their anger. However, perhaps still vividly recalling the earthquake-like experience, they promptly opened their mouths to speak.

The man in the administrative robe was a seventh-rank official from Charloin, while the mage belonged to the ‘Sapphire Mage Union,’ the largest mage coalition in the south. The remaining individual was from a trading guild that had been conducting business in Charloin for generations, seemingly holding some significant position in the city’s overall merchants’ association.

They tried to emphasize their importance, hoping to intimidate Yuder slightly, but they couldn’t have imagined that Yuder had already dismissed their names from his mind upon hearing them.

The only thing Yuder retained was the sliver of useful information hidden within their grandiose introductions.

‘As expected, all three have connections with the nobles opposing the Emperor. They must be motivated by the anticipation of future benefits should this endeavor succeed.’

Not everyone who had come to protest was driven by such motives. Yuder would have bet that many believed they were genuinely protecting the safety of Charloin.

It was these individuals, who wouldn’t normally have stepped forward, who were incited by those seeking political gain the very ‘voices’ who had taken it upon themselves to lead this cause.

In essence, if these instigators were dealt with, the rest of the problem would likely resolve itself.

‘Now, let’s deal with them one by one.’

“So, what exactly are your demands?”

Yuder asked impassively, causing each of the three to furrow their brows.

The mage in the robe was the first to clear his throat and speak up.

“Don’t you understand even after seeing all this? We cannot tolerate a dangerous group like the Cavalry entering Charloin, the largest city in the south. Why must you establish a branch in Charloin? Just a bit further south, there are suitable areas like Mclara.”

“You’re right,” agreed the official. “Many administrators in Charloin share the same concern. Even though the High Minister has recommended cooperation, it overlooks the unique characteristics of our region. Moreover, the transaction regarding this building intended for the branch was far from clean. Lord Giol Terme, a third-rank official, demands clarification and adjustment.”

Lastly, the merchant added his piece.

“Charloin is trembling with anxiety due to the Awakeners coming for your assessment or whatever it is. The trading guilds have suffered significant business losses. Shouldn’t the Cavalry take responsibility for this?”

Their statements were lengthy, but could be summarized succinctly:

‘Such nonsense, drawn out so long.’

Yuder, with an expressionless face, turned to look at Kurga.

“Kurga.”

“Huh? Yeah?”

“It seems we’ll need to write down and organize these demands. Could you bring some paper?”

“Paper? Okay.”

Kurga, slightly puzzled, brought over the paper, which was then placed on the long table.

“The pen is here, so you can write with this.”

“That’s alright. I have my pen here.”

Yuder produced a pen from his pocket. At that moment, the official’s eyes twitched nervously.

‘What’s that?’

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Chapter 650

“That’s alright. I have my pen here.”

Yuder produced a pen from his pocket. At that moment, the official’s eyes twitched nervously.

‘What’s that?’

Simultaneously, the mage who sneakily glanced at the yellow magic stone brooch, which had subtly revealed itself from the flipped edge of Yuder’s coat, widened his eyes slightly in recognition.

‘That brooch, adorned with a magic stone and inscriptions… Could it be?’

The merchant, too, was not merely a passive observer. He scrutinized the gloves on Yuder’s pen-holding hand with a suspicious gaze, blinking rapidly.

‘I didn’t notice before… but those gloves, now that I see them…?’

Silence fell.

‘It’s as if I can hear their thoughts rolling in their eyes.’

Yuder pretended not to notice the three onlookers who had begun to scrutinize their surroundings with renewed interest, focusing instead on documenting their statements on paper.

Writing was merely a tool for him. The true spectacle lay in the attention these three rascals directed towards other aspects of the scene. If they were causing a stir here, they must be quite greedy. Yet, this also implied their insignificance within their respective groups.

Why would those with power, skill, and connections bother coming here? It's the ones without prospects of success who resort to such measures.

Such individuals often fail to see the bigger picture, getting buried in short-term gains and obsessively clinging to connections, all the while forsaking any semblance of loyalty or honor.

Initially, when they followed him here, they were almost out of their minds. But sitting quietly in this space, anyone would regain their composure.

And so, they began to notice things previously overlooked.

Yuder had brought two items with him, deliberately selected before leaving the capital: a magic pen exclusively used by High Minister Hebreyina Reiflang, and a magic stone brooch sent from the Western Mage Union.

The High Minister's magic pen, which could turn water into ink, was custom-made, with the High Minister's name and family crest prominently engraved. Though the High Minister's position wasn't remarkably powerful, Hebreyina Reiflang herself hailed from a prestigious noble family.

Her lack of immense power was only relative to the four great dukedoms; to a lowly 7th-rank official from the south, she was an unreachable figure of authority.

The 7th-rank official, upon seeing Yuder Aile effortlessly using a pen signifying deep personal ties with the High Minister, must have thought:

'I've never heard of the High Minister having a personal connection with a Cavalry member… Was the cooperation directive more than just a routine recommendation? Could it be…'

‘If I make a bad impression here, will my name reach the High Minister directly?’

Such thoughts were inevitable.

‘The 3rd-rank official he mentioned earlier must be his direct backers, probably from the noble faction. But here, we have the High Minister.’

To the officials, the high minister was the highest authority. Desiring to impress a 3rd-rank official and inadvertently inciting the high minister’s wrath, leading to a sudden loss of livelihood, was not an experience they would welcome.

‘Even if he does, there’s no belief that his backer will take responsibility for the aftermath.’

In the silence, a bead of sweat formed on the forehead of the 7th-rank official.

At the same moment, the mage harbored a thought similar yet distinct from the official’s.

‘I’m not mistaken. That’s undoubtedly the insignia of the Western Mage Union, the talk of recent times. And that embedded yellow magic stone, an unseen top-quality product… Could it possibly be from the highly-valued Great Sarain Forest Mine? And if they’ve even engraved magic onto it…!’

The Southern Sapphire Mage Union, where he hailed from, differed greatly from the research-focused Western Mage Union. To put it kindly, it was a place of ancient tradition; alternatively, it had long been engrossed in serving nobility with magic tools rather than pursuing magic research.

The majority of its mages had long given up on advancing in the Pearl Tower, returning to their roots due to their lack of magic talents.

Even though they could have dedicated themselves to research despite lacking magic aptitude, the Sapphire Mage Union did not take much pleasure in that either.

Effectively, they were more akin to merchants who enjoyed crafting magic tools for profit than true mages. Hence, they were quick to recognize the latest and finest magic tools, always envying other mages who gained honor through proper research.

The Sapphire Mage Union might have had influence locally, but among mages, they had little to boast about. In contrast, the Western Mage Union had recently made a name across the continent by successfully developing a grand magic spell, a feat not attempted for centuries. Their years of arduous research in the Great Sarain Forest, leading to the discovery of the continent's largest magic stone mine, was another testament to their accomplishments.

To the mages of that time, they were adventurers who had struck a hidden gold mine.

The mage recalled the brooch adorned with the bold emblem of the Western Mage Union.

Typically, a mage wouldn't bestow such a precious and painstakingly crafted item on an Awakener. However, if that man was indeed 'Yuder Aile', then it made sense that the Western Mage Union would gift it to him.

'If he's the Yuder Aile of the great 'Yuder No. 1' magic spell announced by the Western Mage Union, then it's only natural they'd spare no expense…!'

It was a monumental magic spell that he couldn't dream of creating even in a lifetime. If the person who knew all about that magic, which every mage wondered about, was truly here, it was an astounding revelation.

For the first time in a long while, the mage felt the blood of a mage boiling within him. He was irresistibly eager to ask Yuder about the brooch, the magic stone, and anything regarding the ‘Yuder No. 1’ of the Western Mage Union.

Yet, Yuder, unmoved by the mage’s eager gaze, continued to silently jot down his earlier words on paper. It was then that the mage realized anew the demands he had made as a representative of the Sapphire Mage Union were likely unwelcome from Yuder Aile and the Cavalry’s standpoint.

‘Ah, that’s right. Damn! If I had known someone like him would be here, I wouldn’t have spoken so harshly earlier… Now, our union’s image must be tarnished. How do I handle this?’

While the mage jittered his knee nervously, the third and last protester from the trading house was peeling the skin off his dry lips for a slightly different reason than the previous two.

‘Those guys… what are they? How can they nonchalantly wear such incredible items, covered in dirt as if they’re nothing!’

It all began with the gloves Yuder was wearing. The merchant was initially astonished by the sophisticated magic pen that required no ink, but upon closer inspection, he realized that the black gloves adorning Yuder’s pen-holding hand were an even more luxurious product.

Curious, they peered under the table, only to find that the neatly placed shoes under Yuder’s chair were crafted from a more expensive and inconspicuous leather than the gloves. However, what truly shocked the merchant was something else.

At first barely noticeable due to their unassuming appearance, the shoes of the man seated next to Yuder were even more luxurious than Yuder’s own. The merchant thought he was mistaken, but he

wasn’t. Raising his head to scrutinize the man’s clothing, he started noticing incredible items.

Leather treated with hard-to-find special drugs and liquids. An old-looking but remarkably clean and unraveled special fabric. Small decorations clearly crafted from numerous painstakingly cut and polished precious materials and magic stones.

To the untrained eye, these items might appear as mere ordinary garb that any mercenary or traveler could wear. However, the merchant, who had spent his life in Charloin, a place where rare items from across the continent passed through, could not overlook their true worth.

As the merchant assessed the value of each item the man wore, he soon realized that attempting to calculate their collective worth was futile, a realization that brought with it a dizzying sense of awe.

‘How can one person possibly wear all these items? And why am I only realizing this now?’

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Chapter 651

‘How can one person possibly wear all these items? And why am I only realizing this now?’

The reason was, of course, due to the transformative magic tools worn exclusively by Kishiar and Nathan Zuckerman. These tools, crafted hundreds of years ago, possessed effects far more powerful than similar contemporary devices. Not only could they alter appearances, but they also slightly blurred the perception of those who saw them, making them virtually unrecognizable even to skilled mages.

Although once the transformed state was recognized, the blurring effect diminished, this was irrelevant to those present.

Yuder meticulously and slowly noted every statement before setting down his pen, at which point the three petitioners simultaneously twitched as if on cue.

“I have recorded all the demands made to the Cavalry. Please review them and let me know if anything is amiss.”

The three scanned the blunt statements scrawled on the paper, their eyes darting restlessly.

After a moment, the official cleared his throat and spoke first.

“Well… I’ve read it. However, it seems there were some communication issues…”

“What do you mean by ‘communication issues’? Can you be more specific?”

Yuder asked, his face betraying no understanding of the implied meaning.

‘Is he genuinely asking, or does he want to see us bend over backwards…!’

The seventh-rank official’s face cycled through various hues before finally turning beet red.

“Ahem, ahem. This part here…”

“Ah. You mean the part about the Cavalry’s acquisition of this building for the southern branch being less than straightforward.”

Perhaps it was his emotionless, icy voice. Yuder Aile had the uncanny ability to make his words clearly audible without raising his voice.

Despite his earlier statement being precisely repeated, the official felt as if his true intentions were being laid bare for all to see and subtly covered his eyes with his hand.

“That’s right.”

“You did say you wanted an explanation, but are you now suggesting otherwise?”

“Well, upon reflection, there was no issue with the submission of the related documents. Our request for an explanation was primarily due to the concerns of third-rank official Lord Giol Terme, who was refused a conversation for transaction verification with the original owner of the building. But now, I think such verification may not be immediately necessary.”

The seventh-rank official smoothly shifted the blame to his superior, the third-rank official, his eyes darting around as he spoke rapidly.

“So, what I mean is, the explanation and adjustment I requested earlier may have sounded more abrupt than intended. I’d like to rephrase it as a simple verification of tasks, and discuss the rest after the Cavalry recruitment and other urgent matters are concluded.”

Yuder alternated between the written words and the official’s face.

“Weren’t you in a hurry for an explanation earlier? According to Kurga, you’ve been coming here daily for it, so I assumed it was urgent.”

“…”

“Didn’t you say that, Kurga?”

“Hmm- yes. That’s right.”

Enough checking! the official inwardly shouted, though Yuder continued speaking with an unfazed expression.

“In fact, the explanation you seek is not so difficult. If the southern administrative office needs it, the Cavalry can bring all the relevant documents regarding the building sale from the capital. However, meeting the original owner now or later seems unlikely.”

“Why is that?”

“The original owner of this building is currently busy in the capital, serving as the high minister. It would be challenging to request her presence here to confirm the transaction.”

At these words, the thoughts of the seventh-rank official temporarily halted.

After a moment, he stammered, doubting his own ears.

“The high minister, you say? That’s impossible. Our information indicates…!”

“The name of the official owner differs because this place was originally a joint family property of the high minister’s maternal family, entangled in inheritance issues. But in reality, it belongs to her. After confirming everything in the capital, a representative of the Reiflang family and the Commander of the Cavalry must have legally concluded the sale and submitted the confirmation.”

“This can’t be.”

The building, sought by the Cavalry for a local branch, was located in the old city of Charloin. It was in a prime location but had been neglected for a long time.

A third-rank official, who had long coveted the building, thinking it a fine asset after some repairs, became furious when the Cavalry suddenly bought it to establish a branch. It was more the fact that a dangerous group from outside dared to enter Charloin than a mere aversion to their presence that sparked his anger, something the seventh-rank official knew.

I had wondered how the Cavalry managed to buy it from the real owner…!

In cases of historic buildings, such complications in inheritance were not uncommon. The mistake was not investigating the building’s history thoroughly, especially since it had been neglected for so long.

Officials often summoned people to recheck legally concluded transactions, a method frequently used to harass others, knowing they were in a position of power.

But how could they dare to summon the high minister to the south for this?

The high minister would immediately realize how the southern officials intended to ruin the transaction.

Accusing the Cavalry of deliberately hiding that the building belonged to the high minister would be madness… I've completely misjudged this.

The face of the seventh-rank official turned deathly pale. He muttered, barely able to speak, "I didn't know that. Such a transaction doesn't need verification. I will return and report this."

Yuder's eyes narrowed slightly, watching him.

Securing this building for the Cavalry's branch was a wise decision.

While Yuder had recommended Charloin as the location for the southern branch of the Cavalry, it was Kishiar who astutely acquired this building. He had foreseen such an eventuality and acted a step ahead of the opposition.

A smile flickered in their eyes as they briefly met glances. Even as Kishiar, disguised, openly grinned, the official remained oblivious.

Next was the turn of the mage.

Having witnessed the official's retreat, the mage opened his mouth with a somewhat intimidated expression.

"I… Our union may have had a slight misunderstanding that I would like to correct, if I may."

"What part are you referring to?"

"While I did say earlier that the Cavalry could be somewhat dangerous, that was more the opinion of the uninformed members of our union, not necessarily my own," the mage stated, evading

responsibility in a manner very similar to the official, and forcing an awkward smile.

“I personally, having come here, am willing to help the assistant of the Cavalry Commander. I am not unaware of the impressive feats you accomplished recently in the West with the Western Mage Union.”

“Didn’t you recommend relocating our branch to an area like Mclara? Does that mean you think it’s acceptable for the Cavalry’s branch to be in Charloin?”

The mage’s lips twitched at the tone that seemed to seek confirmation of his vague statements.

‘Damn. I don’t want to be that explicit… But if it means getting even a bit more information about the magic stone mine and Yuder No.1, it might be worth appeasing them for now. As long as the others in the union don’t find out I said this.’

“No, no. That’s a good area too. But since the Cavalry has already secured a building for their branch in Charloin, what can we do? It’s best to continue what we’ve started. I think it’s fine.”

“I see. Then I will amend your statement accordingly here.”

“…”

“Just so you know, once the final draft of this document is complete, to prevent any misunderstandings, we plan to obtain signatures from all three of you who are present.”

The signature required a written name and a confirmation phrase. This meant that even if the union later questioned what had happened, it would be difficult to retract a statement that seemed like a mere slip of the tongue. The mage, not expecting such

thoroughness from someone of commoner origin, turned a shade very similar to that of the seventh-rank official.

Before the mage could say more, Yuder turned his attention to the third and last person, the merchant, who had already broken into a heavy sweat even before the start.

“If you have anything to correct, please speak now. Do you have anything?”

“No… I… “

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“If you have anything to correct, please speak now. Do you have anything?”

“No… I…” stammered the merchant, his gaze wavering uncertainly between the paper where his statement was written, the face of Yuder, and Kishiar, who was sitting beside him. Recognizing the extraordinary items adorned by Kishiar, the merchant felt a chill of realization, making him the only one in the room able to somewhat accurately assess the vague figure of the man.

The merchant pondered, ‘I recall now, that man took his seat before the monster called Commanders assistant. I had thought they, being commoners, simply sat without manners, but perhaps there’s more to it.’

His mind was swirling with various assumptions, but he arrived at a single conclusion.

‘In any case, someone wealthy enough to casually wear such items, yet remain silent and observe the situation, must have an agenda!’

The realization that a person of immense wealth was present without revealing his identity or taking any action struck the merchant with an unknown fear, more daunting than anything else.

Had he been smarter or more aware of the latest rumors about the Cavalry, he might have guessed Kishiar’s identity more accurately and been less startled. In his perception, Duke Peletta was someone unlikely to attend such an event.

Yuder, who had been keenly observing the merchant’s changing expressions, coolly judged the situation.

‘It’s difficult to imagine a Duke of imperial descent sitting here incognito. If he were to come, he’d make a grand entrance like he does in the West.’

Whether Duke Peletta became the new owner of the divine sword or was diligently playing the role of the Cavalry Commander, it mattered not. In their perception, Duke Peletta was a flamboyant man who loved attention and lacked the intellect for complex political maneuvers.

The silent, disguised figure sitting calmly did not fit the image of Duke Peletta. It was naturally assumed that such characteristics cannot be hidden.

Thus, even when Kishiar, in disguise, boldly took his seat before Yuder, and Yuder moved as usual, no one suspected the presence of the Cavalry Commander. They simply assumed the person to be an impolite commoner or, like the merchant, someone of even greater unknown power.

This was the trap of perception crafted by the image Kishiar had cultivated over the years.

‘The more Kishiar conceals himself, the more those who judge by appearances alone fall into doubt and fear.’

Shortly thereafter, the merchant, sweating profusely, spoke up.

“I wish to retract everything I said earlier,” he declared.

The officials and the mage looked at the merchant in astonishment. However, Yuder remained unperturbed.

“Do you wish to retract your statement all of a sudden? You were seeking compensation for commercial losses due to the recruitment of the Cavalry… Should I take it that you no longer require it?”

“Yes. We are settled. Another trade group might come, but for us, it’s done!”

The merchant, even without being asked by Yuder, hastily made excuses for his change of mind. Then he suddenly got up from his seat in a hurry, making an excuse that something urgent had come up.

“A pressing matter that requires leaving before our discussion concludes? It must be truly urgent,” noted Yuder calmly.

“Yes, lately my memory… has not been serving me well, leading to situations like this,” said the merchant.

“Ah, that must be quite a struggle, especially working in the trade guild with such a problem.”

Until then, Kishiar, who had been sitting quietly, spoke for the first time. He looked intently at the merchant, offering words of comfort. Though his words seemed warm and genuine, the merchant, upon meeting his gaze, felt a mix of unknown fear, shame, and anger.

For a merchant who relied on his memory, admitting its failure and receiving consolation was a deeply embarrassing matter.

‘I didn’t mean it… Damn it!’

“Ah, well, I shall see you another time,” said the merchant, his face clearly expressing his desire never to meet again. He hurriedly left the room as if fleeing from something.

Yuder, in the ensuing silence, drew long lines through the merchant’s words with his pen. The scratching sound of the pen on paper resonated loudly in everyone’s ears.

“Hmm… The document will need to be rewritten on a new sheet. Kurga, please take care of it.”

“Of course. Just give me a moment.”

“…”

As the new paper was brought and Yuder picked up his pen, the official and the mage, who had been biting their lips, spoke almost simultaneously, their eyes tightly shut.

“Wait…! Please, just a moment. I also…!”

“Hold on! Before you rewrite, please consider this side too…!”

Startled, the two looked at each other. They were embarrassed and frantic, having been caught trying to back out first.

‘No, I was trying to get out first, but that guy…!’

‘I need to leave before him to save face!’

It’s human nature to become anxious and feel the need to act when seeing others take initiative.

And Yuder knew exactly how to fan the flames of their urgency.

“So… you’re saying you want me to revise what I just wrote? From the Cavalry’s perspective, what’s been stated so far seems sufficient.”

The official and the mage’s expressions twisted when Yuder, who had readily accepted the merchant’s request to disregard his statement, suddenly showed resistance to their similar request.

“No, it’s not about making revisions. We want to treat it as if it never happened…!”

“Yes, that’s what I mean too.”

“Then, doesn’t that mean all the requests you’ve made to the Cavalry for explanations so far will end without any conclusion?”

“That’s…!”

“That doesn’t seem like something you would want. To make it as if it never happened seems a bit too much.”

‘Why is he suddenly playing dumb and refusing! He didn’t do this with the merchant! What’s his intention! That damned man!’

Who were they to blame? They had been the ones insisting on explanations from the Cavalry, even staging protests despite numerous official responses.

As Yuder impassively shook his head, the official and the mage grew increasingly desperate. If they could erase today’s conversation, they could return to their group with some excuse and change their stance, but if things remained as they were, they risked being blamed and suffering losses.

As they struggled with their internal turmoil, Kishiar, who had been observing the scene with amusement, interjected.

“Hmm, then there seems to be only one solution.”

“What would that be?”

As if they had seen a lifeline descend from the heavens, two individuals urgently inquired,

“By recording this entire process, including the request to make it as if it never happened, and having everyone present vow to it, the matter should be resolved cleanly. Adding a clause that forbids anyone not present here from speaking of it will make it as if it never happened, and thus, the concerns of the Cavalry will not come to pass.”

“…What does that mean…?”

The signature had evolved into a vow. Unlike a mere signature, a vow was imbued with magic power, making it impossible to casually break. However, Yuder calmly nodded in agreement to Kishiar’s suggestion.

“That seems like a good approach. If the two of you agree, then the Cavalry shall proceed in that manner.”

It was a strange logic. However, driven by the fear that they might be the ones to bear the brunt of the consequences, the seventh-rank official and the mage eventually agreed to the proposal.

After completing the vow with Yuder, they could only leave after reluctantly agreeing to never repeat the same protest in front of the Cavalry’s office again, their spirits and energy seemingly drained from their faces.

After their departure, the street, once filled with protesters, now lay empty in front of the office. Kurga and the members of the Cavalry cheered.

“Unbelievable! They’ve completely disappeared!”

“This isn’t just for today, right? It’s all settled now, isn’t it?”

“Exactly. Yuder and the Commander have settled everything!”

The members, feeling a wave of relief, surrounded Yuder with beaming smiles. Kishiar was also there, but no one dared approach the Commander, even though his face was disguised.

It took Yuder a while to extricate himself from the crowd. Kishiar, who had been watching with a smile, gently tousled Yuder’s hair to fix the disheveled parts.

‘Now, we’ve silenced all those who opposed us… Time to move on to the next step.’

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Chapter 653

‘Now, we’ve silenced all those who opposed us… Time to move on to the next step.’

Yuder had initially anticipated that at least one individual, lost in their delusion, would continue to spout nonsense to the very end. If that had been the case, they were prepared to revive the memory of the ‘centipede catching’ display they had shown in front of the branch. Fortunately for Yuder, and thankfully for those involved, such a situation did not arise.

If those who were quelled today returned to their groups and conveyed the day’s events accurately, it was unlikely that such an incident would occur again.

They wouldn’t want to be treated as incompetent for surrendering without a fight upon meeting me, so they’ll surely choose their words carefully.

To convince their superiors that their retreat was the only option, they would have to argue that the magnificence of the Cavalry was the sole reason for their decision. The more they insisted on this, the less likely it was that the higher-ups would underestimate the Cavalry, which was a significant advantage for Yuder.

Opposition may not cease entirely, but that’s not an immediate concern.

“Commander, if you’re not too tired, how about we head to the bustling streets of Charloin for a stroll?”

“That sounds wonderful,” Kishiar replied with a sparkle in his eye.

“How about staying out for dinner if it gets too late?”

“If it appears we will be delayed, that would indeed be the better option.”

Unaware of the subtle implications in Kishiar’s words, Yuder replied in a very formal tone, yet their opinions naturally aligned. Kishiar flashed a smile and turned to Nathan Zuckerman.

The knight, understanding his lord’s gaze, raised his hand to signal his decision to not follow.

“I need to contact the members of the Peletta Knights in the south. Please, take care of the duke.”

“Understood. Take care, Nathan. If anything arises, contact us through this branch.”

“Of course.”

Kishiar playfully tapped the shoulder of his quick-witted subordinate.

Upon Yuder announcing their intent to explore Charloin, members of the southern branch, including Kurga, marveled in genuine admiration.

“Despite traveling non-stop to get here and immediately dealing with the troublemakers, you’re now heading out again? How is such stamina possible? Are we even the same species?”

“Do we need to accompany you?”

Their concern was appreciated, but unnecessary. Yuder had visited Charloin several times in a previous life and did not require guidance. When Yuder shook his head, the members understood this and nodded in agreement.

“Perhaps it’s more productive to worry about those who might trouble Yuder rather than Yuder himself…”

“I’m exhausted just from sitting all day dealing with visitors. You’re truly remarkable.”

“That’s because you’re lacking in stamina. Haven’t you been skipping basic fitness training since you arrived here?”

“Keep it down! If Yuder hears that, I’m done for…”

‘I’ve heard everything.’

Yuder, considering the branch’s difficulty in venturing out due to the noisy protesters, decided to enhance the basic fitness training in comparison to what was planned for other branches.

“Before we head out, there’s something I came to receive.”

“Something to receive? What’s that?”

“Oh, that…”

Kurga belatedly realized what Yuder meant and responded in understanding.

“You remember the favor you left with me before leaving?” Kurga asked, confirming its importance.

“Yes,” Yuder affirmed.

“I’ve been organizing it with the others during this time. Here.”

Kurga handed over a paper densely filled with writings. The members, peeking over, widened their eyes in surprise.

“Huh? Is this… Didn’t we just ask them casually when recruiting? Was there a reason behind it?”

“What is it?” another queried.

“The locations of the lodgings where the Cavalry applicants are staying!”

“Why do we need this now? What are you planning to do with it?”

There was, of course, a reason. The locations of these lodgings were key clues in uncovering what they sought.

‘The lodgings of those who came to apply are usually clustered in similar areas.’

Where inns congregated, so too did taverns and various entertainment establishments. It was common for inns to also run restaurants or pubs.

This meant that the operators of illegal fighting rings targeting the Awakeners, and the traces of drug dealings, would likely be found in these crowded areas.

‘These parasites cannot survive without a host.’

In his previous life, Yuder had only begun clamping down on the illegal fighting rings and drug trade after they had become rampant, making the need to search for leads unnecessary. Now, earlier in the timeline, the search might be more challenging, but Yuder knew the ultimate outcome would be the same and felt no anxiety.

Yuder quickly scanned the paper Kurga had given him and identified two main areas where the majority of the Cavalry applicants were staying. He then returned the paper, informing the members of their new task.

“Until now, it was difficult to go outside due to the noisy troublemakers, but that won’t be the case moving forward. Starting

tomorrow, we'll be catching and burning those leeches hiding and lurking in Charloin."

"Burn them? What do you mean?"

"I'll visit the places first and then inform you tomorrow. No need to waste time."

The members blinked, then understood Yuder's words in their own way.

"Ah… Is this similar to what we did in the west? Leave it to us! We've been itching to smash something for a while."

Satisfied with their response, Yuder nodded and left the branch.

Kishiar was waiting outside, having secured a carriage. Yuder climbed aboard without hesitation, and soon they were alone.

"Have you found the places you wanted to see?"

"Yes. Kurga was quite helpful."

"Everyone's been working diligently, even amidst the busyness. That's good."

"I think their physical fitness has dropped a bit from staying inside all the time, so I plan to help them improve that."

The members would have screamed if they heard, but Kishiar merely laughed silently.

"So, where does the assistant want to go today?"

"There are two places I plan to visit."

One was an area with cheap inns, and the other, a bustling district with relatively expensive hotels. This division arose due to the

varying financial capabilities of the applicants.

Yuder explained why he intended to visit these places and briefly mentioned today's objective.

"Somewhere in those two areas, there must be an illegal fighting ring and the drugs we saw in the west, originating from Southern merchants. I want to find and eradicate these elements beforehand."

"I'm an expert in such matters," Kishiar declared, crossing his legs and tilting his head in a carefree manner, a slight lift at the corners of his lips. Despite his face being obscured by a disguise, an oddly decadent and dangerous aura seemed to hover over his features in an instant.

"Since it's a bit early for dinner… how about we start by visiting some places for a quick look?"

The first stop for them was an area abundant with cheap inns. Yuder looked around a few times, feeling a sense of familiarity.

'Things are a bit different from what I remember… but I think I've been here in my previous life. Back then, it wasn't a place fit for stepping foot in.'

The memory of people intoxicated by drugs, sprawled amidst filth, overlaid the current, somewhat shabby but relatively clean alleys before fading away.

'So this was its original state.'

"Do you have any particular store in mind?"

Kishiar asked this, looking at Yuder, who was surveying the area. It seemed that today, Kishiar was entirely willing to leave the choice of destination up to Yuder.

After a moment’s consideration, Yuder pointed to one place.

“That inn seems to be the largest around here. Shall we stop by?”

The chosen location was a place that sold both food and drink, with the entire first floor open, extending tables to the outside. People sat at these outdoor tables, engaged in loud conversations, drinking, or enjoying card games.

“Nice. How about we join those playing cards over there?”

As soon as Kishiar suggested this and they sat down with a light beer each, he started offering unsolicited advice to the players at the next table.

“Hmm, I wouldn’t play that card right now. It wouldn’t be too late to play it after waiting a bit, right?”

“Eh?”

It was common in such inexpensive taverns for bystanders to offer advice during a game. The semi-intoxicated card players naturally followed Kishiar’s suggestions, and as his advice turned out to be spot on, they were quite amazed.

“You seem to have some experience with cards, huh?”

“I have a bit of a knack for it.”

“You don’t seem like you’re from the south… Maybe the central region?”

“Something like that.”

It was the first time Yuder had seen Kishiar blend in with others in this manner, and he hadn’t expected him to do so naturally. Yuder, who had grown up a commoner, watched in awe as Kishiar, who

easily ingratiated himself with the people, even managed to draw Yuder into their circle.

After a few rounds of light wins and losses, Kishiar casually broached the main topic.

“By the way, do you know of any places nearby where more interesting games are played?”

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Chapter 654

“By the way, do you know of any places nearby where more interesting games are played?”

“More interesting games? Are you talking about dice games or something of that sort?”

“No. The fun I seek is… this.”

Kishiar tapped lightly on the back of the card, adorned with a gold coin pattern, and smiled.

“Money?”

“It was good to come to Charloin with a purpose, but then I realized I was short on lodging money. I wouldnt mind sleeping in the streets alone, but now I have companions.”

Kishiar continued speaking while expertly shuffling the cards.

“That’s why I’m looking for an interesting game. Something that could fill the shortfall in our travel expenses.”

This meant he was searching for a gambling game involving stakes of money. Yuder didn’t miss the slight change in the expressions of those who had been casually flipping cards.

“If you came to Charloin for a purpose… You’re not, by any chance, ‘those people’?”

The person sitting next to Kishiar gestured subtly towards a direction. It was towards the street where one could catch a glimpse of the top of the southern branch building of the Cavalry.

“Right. Haven’t you seen more of our kind around here lately?”

“Hmm. Well, yes.”

Despite their conversation hinting that Kishiar and Yuder were Awakeners who had come to apply to the Cavalry, the card players didn’t seem overly surprised.

Without fear or hesitation, as they subtly met each other’s gaze, Yuder was certain Kishiar had picked the right people to glean information from.

“You seem to have just average skills in the game. Aren’t you looking into too dangerous a way to earn travel money? The games where you can make money are totally different from this kind of play.”

“Oh, is that how it seemed?”

Kishiar cheekily responded.

“You all might have been too drunk to remember, but I’ve participated in four rounds since I joined this table. Win, lose, win, lose, and now it’s ongoing. Does anyone remember by how many points I won and lost?”

“When you won, it was with a 5-point difference from the second place, and when you lost, it was by 5 points to the first place.”

The previously silent Yuder answered, causing the men playing the card game to look at each other. In disbelief, they counted on their fingers, trying to recall the events. After a moment, they all fell silent.

“…It’s true.”

Simply controlling winning and losing was something a skilled player could easily do. But to alternate wins and losses by the same score difference without arousing any suspicion from others was truly an astonishing feat.

“That… Is that your ability? Did you use your power?”

“No. My power has nothing to do with this.”

“Then how…”

“I’m just naturally good at this. Maybe I have a good sense.”

Kishiar casually answered, shaking the cards in his hand.

“If I win this round too, by a 5-point margin, would you tell me some places where we can play a decent game?”

“Alright. Let’s see you try.”

What had been a light-hearted game before now took on a heavier, tenser atmosphere. The men stopped drinking and watched Kishiar intently, making sure he didn’t use any small tricks.

Yet, despite this, the flag of victory was claimed by Kishiar La Orr.

“Exactly a 5-point difference. It’s over.”

“…”

Everyone fell silent at the last card Kishiar laid down.

“There was definitely no trickery…”

“He just said he’s got a good sense.”

As Kishiar bantered, the men scrutinized his cards, flipping them over and peering closely. Amidst their inspection, Kishiar, who

leaned back nonchalantly in his chair, turned to Yuder and spoke.

“Ah. Perhaps I’ve played the game too earnestly; my throat is parched. It would be nice if someone awarded me with a cold beer.”

“Just ask for it normally.”

Though Yuder spoke thus, he lightly picked up Kishiar’s beer glass and brought it to his lips. He didn’t forget to use a slight power to cool the beer inside.

The man who gulped down several refreshing sips widened his eyes and expressed his gratitude.

“There’s no fun in just receiving. Anything received as a reward always tastes better. Even a 70-year-old Raifa wine wouldn’t seem as sweet and refreshing as this single sip right now.”

””

It seemed like an exaggerated comparison, but fortunately, he appeared satisfied.

Meanwhile, the men finally confirmed that there were no tricks in the cards and lifted their heads.

“Huh”

“Do you believe it now?”

“I’m not sure what exactly you did, but yes Hiding it well is also a skill. If this is true, you won’t starve anywhere you go.”

“That’s been the case indeed.”

“If you really want to test your luck, look for shops with a red dice painted under their signs. With more people like you around these days, many are going there hoping to make quick money.”

“Red dice?”

“It’s managed by a guy named Nukijo, famous for ‘that’ in Charloin.”

When mentioning ‘that,’ the speaker gestured with clenched fists shaking left and right. It was a sign used to collectively describe underground groups involved in all sorts of unsavory activities.

“Hmm. I’m most curious about what kind of games they play there. Won’t you tell me?”

“We don’t know much about that. We’ve heard that some betting games are popular lately.”

“Betting, huh.”

“It won’t be hard to find. Those guys are always lurking around here. Maybe they’re even watching this game now and will approach you. I saw people like you playing games with them nearby and then following them not long ago.”

After saying this, the men, feeling the game’s excitement had dwindled, packed up the cards and left. Yuder, looking at the empty glasses left behind, spoke.

“The name Nukijo. It sounds familiar.”

“Yeah? What about him?”

“If I remember correctly… In the previous game, he was the owner of the largest fighting arena in the South.”

At that time, there were numerous fighting arenas in the South, but the Nukijo Arena was the largest. Nobles watched Awakeners and monsters fight there, betting money while drinking alcohol laced

with drugs. An Awakener with the ability to entertain with various powers was nothing less than a top betting commodity.

On the lower floors, below the nobles, non-Awakeners were often forced to fight Awakeners for entertainment, in gambling fights targeting those of lower status. Those who fought there were usually heavily in debt, risking their lives.

If they lost, they were drugged, dismembered, and fed to beasts, all while onlookers laughed and enjoyed their drinks.

The orchestrator of that dreadful hell was the operator himself.

At that point in time, the fighting arena probably hadn't developed as extensively as in his previous life. However, the existence of such an establishment was evident from the attempted human trafficking by the Tain Duke's family seen in the West and through Ershi. Yuder believed that coming here would definitely lead to catching a tail.

'Had I failed to stop the human trafficking attempt by Tain Duke and Baron Willhem back then, they probably wouldn't be here now, trying to recruit people coming to join the Cavalry.'

Fresh blood is always needed in betting fights.

Since they couldn't obtain this blood from the West, Yuder figured they must be quite desperate by now.

And it seemed his conjecture was not wrong.

"It's good then. We just need to look for the places marked with red dice."

"Yes. Thanks to the Commander choosing the right people."

"If people are already sitting around playing card games before it's even time for dinner, it's obvious. Though they pretended

otherwise, those guys are likely part of Nukijo's gang or somewhat connected. But…"

Kishiar, who had been smoothly continuing the conversation, suddenly paused, drawing out the silence.

'Has something gone wrong?'

Yuder quickly scanned the surroundings, preparing to unleash his power if needed.

"Isn't it risky to use such a title for addressing me here where someone might hear? It might also be dangerous to use it at our next destination. What do you think?"

"…"

Realizing that Kishiar's concern was completely different from what he had anticipated, Yuder relaxed his tensed muscles somewhat disappointedly.

'It's a valid point, though…'

"That is true. Shall we avoid using titles then? Or perhaps I could pretend to be a knight escort like Sir Zuckerman…"

"No. I absolutely do not want to be addressed as 'my lord'."

Kishiar shook his head, resting his chin on his hand.

"Isn't there something else?"

"…Something else, you say."

"Yes. There are various titles and forms of address in the world, after all."

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Chapter 655

“Yes. There are various titles and forms of address in the world, after all.”

Yuder fell silent, pondering the diverse titles. Kishiar, counting on his fingers, continued slowly, “Status, age, gender, name, nickname, endearment, relationship all can serve as titles. Among these, which would be best for us to use, so we can approach the fighting arena without arousing suspicion, pretending to be Awakeners who have come for the Cavalry?”

“I’m not sure I’ll follow whichever you decide is best,” Yuder replied, indifferent. After all, it was just a temporary measure to deceive others while investigating the fighting arena. The specific title wasn’t important.

But for Kishiar, it seemed to matter more.

With a sly smile, the man tilted his head, lowering his voice to a whisper, “Let’s consider some options. We should exclude status and perhaps gender too. Age, hmm… Would it mean I have to call you ‘big brother,’ or the other way around?”

Yuder felt a shiver run down his spine at the thought. It was one thing to call Enon ‘big brother,’ but the idea of Kishiar addressing him that way felt unsettling, not just because of their mismatched appearances.

“Surprising. I never thought of it, but the idea gives me goosebumps as soon as I heard it.”

Kishiar burst into laughter, seeing Yuder’s furrowed brow, “Then what remains are names and relationships.”

Kishiar’s eyes narrowed into a crescent, “Actually, you once called me by my name in a dream… Do you remember?”

“Did I? When was that… Ah.”

Yuder recalled a dream right after his heat period ended, about a past life ceremony. After the dream Kishiar disappeared, Yuder had spoken his name.

Kishiar La Orr.

It was a name he often thought of but rarely spoke aloud.

“Are you referring to that time after the heat period?”

“Yes. I was thrilled then. In a good way.”

To Yuder, calling Kishiar by his name felt more like answering a question than a deliberate choice. He hadn’t pondered it deeply, but it seemed to have left a significant impression on Kishiar.

“Did you ever call me that in the previous game?”

“No, back then…”

Yuder recalled with some discomfort his past life memories. His way of addressing Kishiar had been inconsistent. Initially, ‘Commander’ sufficed, but after Yuder became the Commander, he struggled to call him ‘Duke.’ His annoyance and anger at Kishiar’s corrections were palpable, often resorting to simply ‘you.’

‘I can’t say I wasn’t tempted to pass it off as imperial defamation.’

However, Kishiar seemed indifferent to any title other than ‘Commander.’ Yuder’s small acts of rebellion were effortlessly dismissed.

After Kishiar’s death, there was no need to be cautious, so Yuder freely used his name as he pleased.

Although Kishiar La Orr’s death, the last of the imperial lineage, was quietly overlooked, he had died accused of treason.

A traitor is denied both status and honor.

He had lived almost erasing the fact that Kishiar was once his superior from his mind, thus feeling no need to address him with due respect.

The influence of this mindset lingered, for inwardly, he still casually referred to Kishiar by name, though he knew it wasn’t proper.

But what did it matter? No one could know how he referred to someone in his mind.

“…I have never called you by name. I addressed you as ‘Commander’ or ‘Duke’…”

“And?”

Perhaps sensing there was more, Kishiar prodded Yuder, who took too long to reply. Sighing, Yuder admitted, “When I was angry, I sometimes called you ‘you.’ You didn’t seem to mind much, but it was inappropriate nonetheless.”

“Good heavens.”

“…”

“How thrilling. Let’s go with that.”

“Are you serious?”

Yuder couldn’t help but retort.

“Would you prefer your esteemed name? What if someone recognizes it?”

“Of course, my real name is out of the question.”

Kishiar chuckled mischievously.

“My parents had a name they used when I sneaked out incognito.”

This was new to Yuder, who blinked and asked, “Did you have a nickname?”

Imperial family members didn’t create nicknames. Their names had to be perfect in themselves. While they could have formal titles like ‘The Crimson Prince’ or ‘The Emperor of Libra,’ commoner-like endearments were unheard of.

“It’s more of a childhood name used only by my parents. Even my brother, His Majesty, doesn’t use it now. It wasn’t recorded anywhere, given where I was born.”

Kishiar looked somewhat nostalgic as he spoke.

“My mother created it. She boldly disregarded the useless parts of palace traditions and etiquette, insisting on doing what she deemed necessary, despite opposition. This was one of those things.”

“…What was your nickname?”

“Just four letters, but too long for a child to understand. She said, despite opposition, it’s good for a child to have a lovingly given name.”

Yuder knew little about the previous Empress. But this story seemed very much like Kishiar.

“She was remarkable.”

“Indeed. I think so too.”

Kishiar then revealed the name.

“Akit.”

“…”

“And shortened to, Kit.”

Yuder repeated the name, feeling strangely unfamiliar yet intrigued.

“By the way, His Majesty’s childhood name was Lukel. Mother used to call him ‘Lu-‘ for a long time. Can you guess how it was derived?”

“I see.”

Yuder found himself privy to the Emperor’s secret childhood name, adorable and reminiscent of a cute child. He thought it best to keep this knowledge from Emperor Keilusa.

“What about you? Any other names used when you lived with your grandfather?”

“None. My name is short enough.”

Yuder answered, then for the first time in a long while, reminisced about his childhood. A nearly forgotten memory faintly surfaced.

“Um… when I returned from playing in the mountains, all dirty… No, never mind.”

“Starting to say something and then denying it only makes the listener unbearably curious. Are you torturing me intentionally?”

Yuder exhaled a sigh before speaking again.

“He used to say that a mud-caked puppy can’t enter the house, so go wash up first. He said that quite often.”

“A mud-caked puppy” Kishiar murmured, savoring the phrase, and then smiled. “That’s really adorable. It’s clear he cherished and raised you well.”

His gaze was so warm it almost made one squirm. Yuder, avoiding his eyes, muttered, “Yes, well… He was a good man. But I know it’s an inappropriate title for me.”

“Not at all. I could call you that even now. After all, calling you only ‘Yuder’ might alert others that you are the renowned Yuder Aile, so perhaps I should take this opportunity to call you ‘puppy’?”

Yuder knew Kishiar often saw him in a favorable light, but this was crossing a line. Even as a half-joke, it was too much. Yuder shook his head firmly. “Don’t be ridiculous. If necessary, there are other names.”

“Yudrain?”

Yuder hesitated slightly, then nodded.

“Yes.”

The shock he once felt when Kishiar used that name was gone now. He realized that clearly in this moment.

A name Kishiar La Orr had given him, known to no one in this world. It was perfect as a pseudonym.

“That’s sufficient.”

Yuder stood up.

“Please get up, Mr. Akit. There’s much to do before dinner.”

“No, just Akit. And ease up on the formal speech; it creates a sense of distance. Let’s address each other as ‘you.’”

“Now, shall we try it again?” Kishiar, rising to follow, prompted him.

Yuder took a breath, looked directly into Kishiar’s hidden red eyes, and spoke.

“Yes, Akit. Are we done? Let’s go.”

A smile blossomed on Kishiar’s face. Despite his disguise, his captivating smile drew covert glances from nearby people.

“Good. Hearing you call me that feels like possessing the whole world.”

Kishiar extended his hand. Yuder hesitated briefly before taking it.

“Perhaps one day you’ll call me by my real name again. But for now, this is enough.”

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Chapter 656

Beneath its sign, adorned with red dice, the tavern named “Black Orca” was quite renowned in the vicinity.

The red dice symbolized the ownership of the Nukijo gang, who proudly claimed dominion over the nights in Charloin, the largest trading city in the south. The Nukijo’s reputation was so formidable that even knights and soldiers tasked with maintaining order in Charloin would turn a blind eye to any incident under the sign of the red dice.

Among these establishments, the Black Orca had risen in fame over the past few years by providing the newest form of entertainment a direct and successful venture into the world of ‘nightlife.’

This was the ‘Random Combat Gambling.’

“It’s truly amusing. Contestants, strangers to each other, are randomly chosen and sent to the arena. Have you ever seen a child struggling against an adult, or a burly man weeping as he runs from one even larger? It’s hilarious. The randomness makes it all possible. We draw numbered beads from a jar.”

“Hmm.”

Mustache Jack, the doorman of the Black Orca, watched with disinterest as the barrel manager enthusiastically explained the random combat gambling to the new guests.

‘Today brings new fish to the net,’ the doorman thought.

The rules of the random combat gambling were simple: anyone could participate, and there were no complex rules to follow. The

only objective was to win against whoever the opponent might be, earning money based on the number of victories.

“The prize starts at a minimum of one bronze coin per win. The highest tier? Don’t be shocked. Just one win earns you a gold coin! One! Win ten times, and that’s ten gold coins!”

In the lower tiers, where the rewards were meager, fights often involved children or the weak, easily winning with a single punch. Although these matches lacked the thrill of a tightly contested battle, they were amusing in their own right, with inexperienced fighters clumsily brawling, providing sufficient excitement and laughter.

However, the atmosphere in the arena where one could earn a gold coin was entirely different. It was said that each match in this tier often ended with a corpse, underlining its perilous nature.

One might be lucky and face a scrawny child, driven by desperation for money, and win easily. But misfortune could also bring an encounter with a creature or monster far stronger and larger than any human, leading to a swift and gruesome end.

Any weapon was permissible, or none at all.

There were no cowardly tactics in this place. Whether throwing dirt in an opponent’s eyes, striking a vital spot, or feigning defeat only to suddenly rise and stab an overconfident foe, victory was all that mattered.

Thus, the number of long-term participants in the fighting, known as ‘bet horses,’ was exceedingly low. But this was of no concern. The lure of easy money was not unique to the empire alone.

The advantage of a maritime trading city was the constant presence of foreigners who arrived by ship, always filling the city.

Every day brought new participants to the fights, ensuring that the gamblers placing their bets always had fresh excitement and opportunities to wager.

‘But these days, simply winning in random combat isn’t enough to make money. The newer arena downstairs is far more interesting.’

As the doorman was lost in his own thoughts, a newcomer, seemingly aware of his musings, inquired, “I heard there’s something more intriguing than simple random combat here. Is that not the case?”

The barrel manager, startled by the question, quickly scanned the surroundings and then leaned in to whisper to the guests, “How did you come to know of it? Who told you?”

“It was at the Braddock Inn… I believe that was its name? Anyway, some folks there mentioned it while we were playing cards.”

The first guest, whose features were somewhat indistinct, chuckled in response. His companion, shrouded in a black hood, remained silent. The doorman suspected this silent figure to be either a particularly sinister character or a noble in disguise.

‘He looks young, but he’s hiding his face, and his posture has an air of nobility… I’ve seen plenty like him. Perhaps the large companion is his servant?’

“Ah, Braddock. I see. You’ve come to the right place,” the manager said, relaxing a bit with a knowing smile.

“Indeed. Simple random combat is just an old-fashioned game from years past. The hottest game nowadays? It’s ‘that one’ where creatures more monstrous than monsters fiercely battle and jostle, drenching the floor in blood as spectators place their bets.”

A bright smile, incongruous with his cruel words, spread across the manager's face, mirrored by a similar smirk from the doorman.

'Whoever thought this up is a genius at finding ways to make money.'

Two years ago, when the Awakeners first appeared and the initial chaos had subsided, the Nukijo gang began to realize the impact these new beings could have on their random combat fights.

The abilities of the Awakened were flashy and conspicuous. Whether spewing fire or water, or sprouting grotesque horns, their participation in the fights caused the number of gamblers and spectators to surge beyond comparison.

Naturally, creating a new combat arena exclusively for the Awakeners in the basement was the next logical step.

'A lot of effort went into it. Magic spells to prevent destruction, expensive furniture to accommodate the esteemed guests…'

And the new venture was a hit.

Even nobles, eager to maintain appearances, heard the rumors and came, discreetly masked. This was a thrilling and novel form of fighting, unlike any betting game before.

Such was its success that other gangs running similar random combat arenas began seeking out Awakeners to participate in their own events.

Gradually, finding Awakeners for these fights became more challenging. Nukijo, the head of the gang, using his connections, began importing Awakeners regularly from the west about a year ago.

It was a bold decision, made in the belief that this venture would become the gang's primary source of income.

"However, not just anyone can enter and watch like in the first-floor arena. Unfortunately, one needs specific qualifications to participate."

"Qualifications?"

The hooded companion, speaking for the first time, asked with a chilling tone that was as ominous as his silence had been.

The manager, sharing a similar sentiment with the doorman, flinched for a moment before reflexively smiling and was about to speak when the door inside burst open. A group of young men, with faces betraying their naivety, spilled out, accompanied by Regina, one of the managers of the second basement-level fighting arena.

"Is the registration for participants over now?"

"Yes, it is. Come back later with your belongings, please."

"Understood."

"We're really looking forward to having such young and capable individuals join us. See you later."

As Regina bid them farewell with a smile, the young men's faces flushed with embarrassment.

"Ah, yes, of course."

The doorman already knew who they were. These were the Awakeners, who, like the first and second guests present, had been lured by other gangs to this place a few hours earlier.

'Were they the ones who said they came to apply for the Cavalry recruitment? I believe they passed the first round of tests, but well,

that’s all over now. They’ve come here to dig their own graves. I wonder if they’ll even make it to the second round.’

The Black Orca had seen a fair share of such naive souls lately. The doorman secretly savored a mischievous pleasure, imagining how their faces would change in a few hours, having come here with light hearts, hoping to gather travel expenses.

So engrossed was he in this thought that he failed to notice the hooded second guest watching these newcomers intently.

‘What would the Cavalry say about those who volunteered but deserted midway?’

As far as they knew, many of the Awakeners who came to join the Cavalry deserted for various reasons: failing the first test, passing but having sudden family emergencies, finding the atmosphere of the Cavalry different from their expectations, encountering an enemy they disliked… the reasons were diverse.

Once they deserted, the Cavalry had no more to do with them. Busy with the influx of applicants, the Cavalry focused on their work while the Nukijo gang lured the wandering Awakeners into participating in their fights.

Those who came of their own volition and later cried foul found it too late to change their minds. The gang cunningly held them with hidden clauses in contracts and oaths, using them in the second basement-level arena until they were of no more use.

‘These sturdy ones should last a while.’

He had been quite anxious due to a mishap where participants from the west failed to arrive. Thankfully, fortune favored them. The establishment of the Cavalry branch in the city and their recruitment had been a stroke of luck for the Nukijo gang.

‘They probably don’t know what they’re getting into.’

As the doorman watched the young Awakeners leave the tavern, smiling silently to himself, the first and second guests whispered to each other.

Then, the first guest smiled and began to speak.

“Hmm. It seems that tonight is the night for that ‘more interesting fight’, isn’t it?”

“No, it’s tomorrow. It’s not held every day; we need time to prepare.”

“What were the conditions to participate again? I seem to have missed your answer earlier.”

“Ah. If you wish to bet and watch, you must first pay an entrance fee. It’s about five silver coins, and you need to take an oath to enter. It’s for the safety of our guests, you could say. You can choose not to take the oath, but keep in mind that the entrance fee will be much higher then.”

“I see.”

The first guest nodded his head.

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“What will you do then? Will you pay the entry fee now, or…?”

“It seems you’re under some misconception,” retorted the second guest in an icy tone.

“We never said we wanted to participate ‘by placing bets’.”

“Excuse me?”

The perplexed manager echoed, his eyes blinking in realization.

“So, you’re not here to place bets, but… you two wish to participate directly?”

“Yes.”

“Excuse me, but… you’re Awakeners, aren’t you? Both of you?”

The manager’s tone shifted, as did that of the doorman who had been idly standing guard. Both were taken aback upon realizing these two were not the usual gamblers, but the exact opposite.

“Does it not appear so?”

It hadn’t appeared so at all! The first guest might have been questionable, but the second guest was surely of noble descent or so they had thought. Clearly, their judgment was flawed.

The manager, sharing the doorman’s incredulity, asked with a disbelieving gaze, “Then, perhaps, you’ve come to apply for the Cavalry… Both of you?”

Instead of a verbal response, the first guest simply smiled, a tacit affirmation.

“We missed the chance to explain when you started elaborating upon our arrival.”

“Ah…”

Indeed, these two had shown none of the hesitation or eagerness typical of first-time visitors seeking profit. It had seemed only natural to mistake them for gamblers.

The astounded manager scrutinized them anew, not as guests to be served, but as potential merchandise to be appraised.

“You both seem physically fit… and not in any apparent hurry. Why the interest in participating?”

“That’s your opinion, not ours,” the second guest replied coolly, as the first guest gently patted his shoulder in a calming gesture and added, “We’re just poor souls without a place to stay tonight. Usually, we make do with earnings from games, but hearing this place is quite lucrative, we decided to try our luck. No other reason. Do we need one?”

“No, not at all…”

Although surprised, the manager couldn’t just let potential earnings slip away.

He stood up and motioned them to follow. “Come with me.”

They headed towards a door at the back of the tavern, previously exited by naive young Awakeners. Beyond it lay a well-decorated corridor and a desk with contracts and oaths for participants.

“If you want to earn money by fighting, you’ll need to sign these. But first, show us proof of your abilities.”

“I’ll go first…”

“No, let me,” the second guest interjected, stepping ahead of the first guest.

“There’s no need for that. I should go first.”

“It’s potentially dangerous. It’s only right that I go first.”

Their insistence on being first was frustrating to witness. The men’s bickering was unbearably irksome. The manager, pressing down his irritation with patience, thought, ‘Does it matter who goes first? Just do it quickly! Weren’t you eager to participate, you fools?’

Fortunately for him, the conclusion came swiftly, thanks to the second guest’s threatening words, spoken with a face so cold it seemed impervious to even the tip of a blade.

“Remember, Akit, I’ve already conceded enough by allowing us to join together. I could easily have participated alone.”

The first guest, who had initially widened his eyes in surprise, grinned helplessly and stepped back.

“Really… You’re so stubborn. You know too well what I’m weak against.”

Despite his words, the smile on his face suggested he was quite pleased.

‘Is he actually happy to be threatened by someone smaller than him? Is he mad?’

Initially, the manager had thought they were just ordinary companions. But observing their interaction, he began to suspect otherwise. Had they not both been men, he might have mistaken them for a couple in a deep, loving relationship.

‘…Wait. If these two are really Awakeners… Could it be?’

The manager recalled recent rumors that had drifted south on the wind.

‘Duke Peletta, the Commander of the Cavalry, took a male member of the Cavalry who had made great achievements in the West as his companion and danced with him at a party Even with differing second genders, it is said that even the Emperor turned a blind eye…’

The impact of that rumor was profound. Even the Nukijo gang, who ran the Awakener fighting rings, had been unaware of such details about Awakeners until then.

The manager suddenly saw the first and second guests in a different light.

‘If these two are in that kind of relationship and have come here together, does that make sense of their strange and awkward behavior?’

As he pondered this, the second guest removed the hood he had been wearing. With the shabby cloth gone from his face, his black hair and pale complexion were revealed, looking neater than expected. The manager judged his speculation to be correct.

‘Young and seemingly well-kept, yet they lack even tonight’s lodging. How recklessly they must have lived.’

“Where do I sign?”

“Ah, but first. If you’re truly an Awakener, you need to show proof. We need to see your abilities to make a decision.”

The prize for winning in the Awakener fighting ring was not just one, but five gold coins per victory. Though he had never seen anyone leave with the money intact, confirmation was mandatory.

‘Sometimes fools pretend to be Awakeners, telling implausible lies to try for the money.’

the second guest nodded, pulled his hood back on, and then, without any preparatory movements, conjured a massive flame right in front of the manager’s face.

“Whoa!”

Startled, the manager fell backward as the flame quickly vanished.

“What are you doing?! You almost burned my face off!”

“Apologies. It’s a bit hard to control,” the second guest said with an expressionless face, his apology seeming far from sincere. The manager, fuming, was about to protest but swallowed his anger instead. He turned to the first guest, his eyes filled with increased wariness.

“…And you?”

“Don’t worry. My ability is more tame than his.”

After saying this, the first guest picked up a quill from the desk and threw it into the air like a dart. The quill, which had been heading towards the wall, suddenly stopped mid-air as if by magic.

The quill quivered, then spun around and flew back into the hands of the one who had thrown it. The manager watched this spectacle, swallowing hard.

He marveled at their abilities: one could instantly conjure and extinguish a massive flame, while the other manipulated objects. Among all the Awakeners who had visited thus far, few possessed such high-level skills.

The excitement of returning to his role as an operator of the gambling ring surged through him.

“Excellent. You may sign right away.”

“I can’t write, so how should I do it?”

“Don’t worry. I’ll write your names for you. You just need to dip your finger in ink and press it on the paper. So, your names are…?”

“Akit. And the one who came with me is… Yudrain.”

The first guest, announcing the name ‘Yudrain’, smirked at the second guest, who showed no reaction. Observing this one-sided amusement, it was clear that Akit was utterly infatuated, driven mad by the allure of a man even though they had different second genders.

After completing the oath, the manager told them to wait and took the documents downstairs. In the inner area of the second floor, busily preparing for tomorrow’s matches, was their leader, Nukijo.

“Hey, boss! We’ve got some useful newcomers.”

“Hmm? What about them?”

After reading the papers handed to him and listening to the explanation, a satisfied smile crept across Nukijo’s face.

“Such abilities are rare. We can put them in the arena tomorrow. They said they have nowhere to stay tonight, so let’s provide lodging here.”

“Is that wise? The current lodgers are in a bit of a rough state…”

“Don’t be foolish. If we let them get away, it’s us who will be in trouble. If the two guys really have different second genders, one must be an Omega, right?”

Nukijo’s eyes gleamed with a devious light.

“We should use this to our advantage in our promotions.”

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Chapter 658

“We should use this to our advantage in our promotions.”

The world was full of tough guys with strong fists and even stronger guts. But Nukijo, who ruled the nights of Charloin, was a different breed; his mind worked swiftly, especially when it came to nefarious deeds. Upon learning that the new sources of income might be a pair of Alpha and Omega Awakeners, Nukijo immediately concocted an even more sensational and lucrative scheme.

“First, pretend to treat them well and lodge them in the quarters. Then, slip them sleeping pills. While they sleep, separate the two and perform a physical examination. Tomorrow, we’ll watch them fight. If they’re skilled, we’ll get them addicted and exploit them. If not, we’ll offer them to our special grade clients for a spectacle of two Awakeners with different second genders feasting upon each other.”

“Incredible. That’s something even I’d like to see. People will bring loads of money just to watch.”

The manager lavished praise on Nukijo, admiring his cunning brain in such matters. It was human nature to enjoy compliments, and Nukijo’s mood soared even higher.

“Exactly. I’ve been thinking the demand for Awakeners with second genders must have increased lately because of Duke Peletta. Honestly, I’m curious how a man who can bear children is structured. The high and mighty are no different from the rest.”

However, for a non-Awakener, it was difficult to discern if someone was an Awakener with a second gender unless they revealed it themselves. For Nukijo, the pair of Awakeners who had willingly shown up was nothing short of a golden opportunity.

“This is the perfect chance to expand the arena. Make sure to handle it well.”

“Understood.”

“Actually, maybe I should take care of it myself. Where are they now?”

Fortunately for Nukijo, the two nave participants were still on the first underground level. The duo looked slightly startled when the rugged-faced Nukijo appeared, but they quickly relaxed as he smiled and extended his hospitality.

“Participants with as much potential as you are personally managed by us. I hear you have nowhere to stay tonight. Why not stay here? We happen to have some rooms available.”

Of course, those rooms were only available because their previous occupants had met their demise. Naturally, neither the manager nor Nukijo mentioned this.

“Hmm, this is rather sudden and a bit inconvenient,” remarked the first guest, who had expected to be immediately taken advantage of when offered shelter. “While I do lack a place to stay, I originally intended to seek assistance elsewhere.”

Contrary to expectations, this individual, who was presumed to be an easy target, stroked his chin thoughtfully and responded with a hint of hesitation.

Look at this. What would you have done if I hadn’t come?’

Nukijo, casting a reproachful glance at the manager, spoke with an unexpectedly amiable tone.

“Is that so? Well, if that’s the case, I must say it can’t be helped. But I’d like to mention that staying with us means free meals. It’s

dinner time now, how about joining us?”

“Dinner?”

“I think it’s a good proposal, considering we’ll soon be working together. It’s a chance to learn more about each other. While there’s no ‘special combat’ tonight, regular fights are scheduled. You might enjoy watching those too.”

“Hmm, I was indeed curious about that.”

The first guest slightly tilted his head, intriguingly simple in appearance yet possessing an ability to provoke interest. Nukijo, annoyed by the individual’s indecisive behavior, soon composed himself, thinking of the money to be extracted from them.

“Indeed, it’s all about mood. With the authority of the owner, I will allow you to see it from a good position. Sit back, relax, and watch those easy-money chasers.”

The ordinary brawl they were about to witness was merely bait. Some of their gang members, who looked ordinary on the outside, were slated to stir things up in the ring.

Such an opportunity was rare. Looking impressed, the first and second guests exchanged glances. After a moment, the second guest nodded slowly in agreement.

“Good.”

“Yes, well thought out.”

Nukijo chuckled heartily as he ascended for a meal with them, not forgetting to signal the manager to drug the food and drink for the two guests.

During the meal, Nukijo gleaned more information about them.

The first and second guests, it turned out, were indeed Awakeners with second genders, originally from the central region but had traveled to Charloin upon hearing of the Cavalry recruitment.

Nukijo filtered this information through his personal sieve of interpretation.

‘Travel, my foot. They must have fled home after Awakening, roaming around as mercenaries. When out of money, they’d gamble to earn more, eventually drifting here. Typical riffraff.’

These discarded pieces, unclaimed by anyone, were now Nukijo’s to pick up, polish, and profit from substantially.

Nukijo smiled in amusement.

However, after the meal and watching the bait fight, an unexpected problem arose.

‘Why aren’t they collapsing? Shouldn’t they at least appear drowsy by now?’

He had definitely mixed the drug into their meals and drinks, enough to knock out not just ordinary people but even Awakeners, rendering them unconscious to the extent of not noticing if their limbs were severed.

Yet, the guests seemed unaffected. Even after repeatedly feeding them more drugged drinks, they remained lively.

‘What are these guys made of?’

When the second guest, having eaten most of the first guest’s portion too, refused any more drinks, the manager beside Nukijo couldn’t hide his astonishment and asked.

“Aren’t you… sleepy?”

“What do you mean?”

“Well, with all the eating, drinking, and watching the fight, one would normally start feeling tired around now…”

As the manager fumbled and answered, the two guests faced each other. After a moment, the first guest let out a sound, “Aha…”

“I’m sorry for worrying so much without realizing it.”

“…Huh?”

“Actually, I was really sleepy but was holding it in. You too, right?”

“…Yes, well. It seems so.”

Shortly thereafter, the two guests leaned on each other’s shoulders and closed their eyes in harmony. It seemed absurd, as if they were feigning sleep, but even when their cheeks were softly tapped and they were toppled over, they did not wake. Confirming that they would not wake no matter what, Nukijo finally unleashed the frustration he had been holding back.

“Damn it! How much did the missing ingredients cost today?”

“When I checked the liquor storeroom and kitchen earlier, it seemed like three days’ worth.”

“Blast! That pig. If he doesn’t do his share, I’ll tie him up in front of the guests and force-feed him feed to see how much he can take, just to get every penny back.”

Even in the midst of this, Nukijo’s scheming for new ways to make money was indeed characteristic of him.

Shortly after, under Nukijo’s orders, some men entered and supported the two guests, leading them to the basement. There,

sturdy ‘quarters’ were built, so solid that even the Awakeners could not easily escape.

The gang, having forcefully ushered the two guests into two separate rooms, rummaged through their clothing and bodies to check their possessions. Though it was unclear if they arrived with any luggage, the items worn by the two captives appeared too worn and old to be of any value.

“The bracelet full of scratches and the rusted copper ring the brown-haired one was wearing were too stubborn to remove, so we left them. As for the black-haired one, we only took his sword. There wasn’t much else of value.”

Upon inspecting the sword brought to him, Nukijo casually glanced at its plain, pitch-black sheath and cast it aside.

“What use does a fire-wielder have for a sword? Seems like some young lad got carried away and stuck a cheap ruby in there. We’ll just pluck that out and sell it later.”

After ensuring the captives’ sleeping quarters were securely locked, the group ascended with a sense of relief, not forgetting to kick the doors of other rooms where cries, akin to those of a beast in distress, emanated, to quiet them down.

Little did they know, just a few minutes later, the two captives they thought securely locked away and asleep, opened their eyes almost as if on cue, a scenario beyond their wildest imaginations.

“Such a lackluster start. There’s not a single fresh idea,” Yuder criticized the unimaginative Nukijo’s gang coldly as he awoke in his bed. Indeed, the operational methods of this fledgling fighting business involving Awakeners seemed much more crude and on a smaller scale compared to what Yuder remembered from his past life.

Yet, their malicious intent seemed no less significant, a realization that was not without its insights.

Yuder stretched his limbs and mentally organized the structure and personnel of the place, which he had observed while eating and watching the fights.

His and Kishiar's visit to the 'Black Orca' tavern was after touring several shops marked with red dice. During their rounds, they gathered information about the general random combat gambling spread across Charloin and the South, as well as the Awakeners fighting rings that had started appearing about a year ago.

Random combat gambling had been systematically established in dozens of locations for a few years, but places actively involving Awakeners were still few. Among them, the 'Black Orca' was the largest and the first in Charloin to create a separate ring for awakened fighters.

Hence, Yuder surmised this place had the highest probability of forcibly involving Awakeners.

Which means, if I burn this place down, it could mean a swift eradication within my reach.

Destruction was easy, but recklessly demolishing it would make it difficult to catch all at once the tails of the nobles or others who visited this place and conspired in various crimes. Therefore, they decided to witness the detailed situation of the Awakener fighting ring with their own eyes.

The sight of the newly tricked recruits of the Cavalry, infuriatingly familiar, was an added bonus.

"If my memory serves, those fellows belonged to the Star of Nagran, the ones I saw earlier today…"

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“If my memory serves, those fellows belonged to the Star of Nagran, the ones I saw earlier today…”

These people had left their homes with difficulty and joined the Cavalry, only to fall prey to such schemes within a day. Judging by their attitudes, filled more with shame and awkwardness than with dark greed, it was clear they had truly believed this place was not as bad as it seemed.

Yuder thought, They don’t know the difference between a regular random fight and one specifically for awakened fighters.

Though frustrated, Yuder realized he needed to act quickly before they became prey in the awakened fighters’ arena.

The contracts and oaths created by the Nukijo gang, as well as the drugs they were fed, posed no real constraint to Yuder. The oaths weren’t even properly certified. Thanks to Kishiar, who had intervened cleverly, allowing him to pretend not to understand the written word and avoiding direct signing, the binding power of the oaths was almost imperceptible.

Of course, to those who don’t understand oaths, it could still be threatening… but that’s not the case for me, Yuder reflected.

He had seen that the oath, for the most part, only compelled the participants to join the fights regardless of the situation, along with subtly mixed clauses to prevent easy escape.

In essence, for those like Yuder, who had no intention of running away and instead planned to destroy the system from within, these oaths were of little concern.

Idiots. It’s evident how easily they’ve been operating until now.

The failure of those responsible for maintaining public order led to such situations. Yuder considered them all worth eliminating.

As Yuder surveyed the room, he counted the debts he would settle when he swept these scoundrels away.

I can overlook the drugs mixed in my food and drink, but the one who hit Kishiar’s face must pay back tenfold. If there are any Awakeners detained here who came for Cavalry recruitment, I will exact a further price for each… Ah, and there’s a part to show to Ershi too.

He remembered Ershi, the vengeful soul he had met in the west. She was currently imprisoned and laboring quietly. A year ago, she had narrowly escaped human trafficking and ended up in the Star of Nagran.

Her descent into vengeance was fueled by the survival of only herself, despite having a family who were also kidnapped. Her deep anger had abated only when her powers surged to the point of self-destruction.

This was reaffirmed through information gathered from several Awakeners from the Star of Nagran, including Robel, during the process of capturing and imprisoning Ershi.

To Ershi, who had screamed at Kishiar, questioning what they had done when others like her needed salvation, Kishiar had calmly replied, “I will help you see clearly again who to blame, who to avenge, and what consequences your own actions have wrought.”

Since then, Ershi had been helping rebuild Tainu, atoning for the indiscriminate killings she had caused.

Now, it was time to show both Ershi and the Cavalry where she had been taken a year ago, and who truly deserved punishment.

As Yuder's gaze sharpened, a faint tapping sound suddenly echoed from above. Looking up, he saw a section of the seemingly empty ceiling retracted upwards, revealing a hidden space. From there, a voice rang out.

"Oh my, the owner of the room is still awake. Would you scold this rude night visitor who desired to see your face at this late hour?"

The voice was grandiose and embarrassingly formal, yet playful and smooth, like something out of a high-society gathering. In an instant, all thoughts cleared from Yuder's mind.

Yuder looked up at the dark void in silence, as if waiting for a response, then finally spoke.

"Come down, then."

"Since I have your permission, I shall descend."

Moments later, Kishiar leaped down from the gap. The tall, imposing man landed silently beside Yuder, making the room seem suddenly smaller.

Kishiar greeted him with a mischievous smile.

"I waited for when you might come, then decided to come myself. Waiting has its charms, but sometimes it's better to seek out what you desire."

Kishiar was indeed larger than life and never short of words.

Yuder, instead of pointing this out, exhaled softly and asked, "Was your journey here uncomfortable?"

“Not in the slightest. The ceiling had a protective magic circle, creating quite a spacious area. Plus, moving from the next room was easy.”

“That’s good to hear.”

“I took the liberty of disabling that magic circle on my way here.”

Had the Nukijo gang heard this, they would have screamed in horror at the destruction of their expensive magic circle, but Yuder was the only one present.

“That’s also good. Are you alright from the drug you took earlier?”

“Absolutely fine. I haven’t cultivated such a weak tolerance to poison. Besides, you ate most of it for me, so perhaps you should be more concerned about yourself.”

“You already know that won’t affect me.”

Yuder had suspected something was amiss when Nukijo kept offering drinks. He had cunningly eaten most of Kishiar’s food in his stead. It had taken time to confirm that the intended effect was sleep, as there were many possibilities for tampering.

I thought it would be more likely a stimulant or relaxant, but a sleeping drug… A rather mundane approach in retrospect.

For Yuder, food was usually consumed without much thought to the quantity. This was one of the rare occasions he had eaten so much, deliberately. He remembered Nukijo’s barely concealed frustration at the sight of him devouring the food and drinks, seemingly regretting the cost.

It seems I ate more eagerly just to spite that fool’s dumbfounded face.

Although he had eaten more than usual, the excess would soon be digested as he began to move and exert himself.

“But before I came here, I noticed something unusual about this place, apart from the protective magic. Have you checked it out?”

“No, what is it?”

Yuder had briefly surveyed his surroundings upon waking but had no idea what Kishiar was referring to. As Yuder shook his head, the corners of Kishiar’s lips twitched upwards.

“It seems like powers don’t manifest properly here. As if there’s something suppressing abilities.”

Suppressing abilities? Yuder immediately tried to conjure fire into the air.

But…

“…It’s true.”

Just like when Yuder had suffered a grave injury in the Great Sarain Forest and his abilities hadn’t recovered, his powers didn’t manifest properly. The flames he tried to summon flickered weakly before extinguishing. Witnessing this, Yuder’s eyebrows twitched in contemplation.

“This is… Those people. They didn’t just lock us up here without any thought.”

“Do you have any idea why?”

“Yes. I suspect it has something to do with the abilities of someone else trapped here.”

That seemed the most likely reason.

“Interesting.”

“We should try to find the cause.”

Yuder and Kishiar then leaped towards the still-open hole in the ceiling. This was easily achievable without relying heavily on the power of wind.

“It’s quite spacious indeed.”

“As I said. It’s big enough to walk around.”

As Kishiar had mentioned, a sizable space existed above the ceiling. It was pitch dark and bottomless, making it difficult to discern direction, but this was hardly an issue for the two of them.

Fortunately, their ability to perceive structures in the darkness remained unhindered in this situation. Yuder easily navigated through the darkness, advancing forward. From what he had briefly observed during his capture, the rooms in this place were mostly lined up in a single row, closely packed together. Listening for any signs of human presence, it wasn’t long before they heard sobbing sounds.

The sounds were muffled and anguished, like a beast in rage yet restrained with a gag.

The initial intent to search for the source of their suppressed powers paused momentarily upon hearing this. Yuder turned his gaze in the direction of the weeping.

Is it over there?

Taking the lead, Yuder moved towards the source of the sound, with Kishiar following. The location wasn’t far from their room. Kishiar easily lifted the floor to reveal the scene below.

The sight in the room viewed from above was harrowing. A bloodied mass was tied with chains, emitting guttural sounds.

Ugh… Ughhhh… Ughhhhh!

It took a considerable amount of time to discern that the grotesque mass before them was indeed a person, and to identify where the face was. This was not only due to the severely disfigured state of the figure, but also because its appearance was quite different from that of an ordinary human.

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Chapter 660

Ugh… Ughhhh… Ughhhhh!

It took a considerable amount of time to discern that the grotesque mass before them was indeed a person, and to identify where the face was. This was not only due to the severely disfigured state of the figure, but also because its appearance was quite different from that of an ordinary human.

Adorning its head were enormous antlers, while large wings protruded from its back. Its arms and legs were covered in thick, long feathers, making it difficult to discern their outline. Upon closer inspection, the face seemed to be a bizarre mix of human and beast.

Yuder, who had encountered many Awakeners with somewhat different appearances, rarely came across one with such a distinct and alien look. More precisely, it was this rarity that made this particular Awakener memorable.

‘It would be harder to forget someone with such a distinct appearance.’

Kishiar, quickly noticing Yuder’s subtle reaction upon recognizing the figure, silently mouthed a question.

‘Is it someone you know?’

Yuder nodded slightly, yet noticeably enough for Kishiar to discern.

‘Which side?’

Whether they had been allies or enemies.

Yuder pondered for a moment, gazing down at the groaning Awakener in pain. Then, he lightly wrote on the back of Kishiar's hand.

'He was once a member of the Cavalry. But he died early.'

The name of this Awakener was Elpkins. In his previous life, he had joined the Cavalry only about a year after they had dismantled several illegal fighting rings in the south. He was known for his immense strength, peculiar appearance, and even more remarkable regenerative abilities, which had garnered high expectations in the Shin Division.

However, Elpkins had a slight problem with his temperament. He would easily get overly excited over trivial matters and, once angered, would charge blindly into battle. His obsession with power was also much more intense compared to his peers.

His tendency to lash out in excessive fights, often ignoring the advice of colleagues during team activities, always kept his reputation within the Cavalry at rock bottom. There were several instances where he deliberately induced a rampage to accelerate his abilities.

'At least he knew to behave in front of me… but that was about it.'

Elpkins, increasingly unable to control his rage, met a gruesome end during a mission, unable to withstand another of his rampages. His regenerative abilities, which he had always relied on to save him from any peril, tragically failed him that time.

His death became a significant catalyst for Yuder to seriously acknowledge the dangers of an Awakener's rampage. It also contributed to the establishment of norms within the Cavalry, preventing members from recklessly inducing rampages for the sake of power.

Yuder briefly conveyed this event to Kishiar, while still looking down at Elpkins, who continued to suffer.

‘I never mentioned that we met in the south in his previous life…’

Indeed, nobody would have wanted to admit being held captive in such a place. It was even less likely for the proud and fierce Elpkins.

In Yuder’s memory, Elpkins had always been able to freely use his regenerative abilities, but now he lay bloodied and unable to use them, a sight that unsettled Yuder.

‘The suppressive power permeating this entire underground space must be hindering his regeneration abilities…’

‘Anyway, we must assess his condition.’

Yuder briefly glanced at Kishiar before leaping down from the ceiling to approach the figure. Even as he drew near, Elpkins seemed oblivious to his presence.

“Ughhhh”

“…”

Up close, Elpkins’ wounds were far more severe than they had appeared from a distance. His blood-stained wings were twisted and broken, and there wasnt a single unmarred limb. The feathers, originally white and blue, were more than half plucked out, leaving his skin tattered and torn.

Compared to these, the flattened and swollen nose and face seemed almost less severe.

However, more than the wounds themselves, Yuder’s gaze was strongly drawn to the ragged piece of cloth that barely served as Elpkins’ clothing. Made seemingly for the sole purpose of display

rather than to cover or warm, the garment was a humiliating sight to behold.

‘I had planned to demolish this place after participating in tomorrow’s fight… but the thought of having to fight in such attire makes me want to hasten our plans.’

Yet, it was this tattered cloth that revealed something significant. Yuder exhaled softly upon noticing Elpkins’ deep wounds trying to close, unsuccessfully fusing and then halting repeatedly. Even under the suppression of his powers, Elpkins’ regenerative ability was struggling to surface, indicating its substantial strength.

He certainly wasn’t someone to die helplessly in such a place.

Kishiar, who had landed beside Yuder, murmured in a low voice.

“Hmm. His condition is not good. He needs immediate treatment.”

Kishiar was not one to easily show emotion, but his tone conveyed a clear message. He, too, had seen and deduced the same things as Yuder, and this evidently led to a significant accumulation of discontent towards the fighting ring.

“Fortunately, he is recovering slowly…”

“Even so, prolonging his pain is not good. Let me take over for a moment.”

Kishiar, a possessor of great divine power, rarely used it outside of treating Yuder, to the extent that it was almost half-forgotten that he possessed such ability.

“Are you sure you can manage?”

“I tested earlier and found that the suppressive power here strongly restrains the power of the Awakener, but doesnt affect other

powers as much. Treating him won’t be a problem. However”

Kishiar began to emit a dazzling white light from his fingertips, muttering to himself.

“Given the severity of his condition, this will use a lot of my power, so I might not be much help afterward.”

That was not an issue. Even if Kishiar did nothing, Yuder could take action, and having him at his side would be more comforting. However, if Kishiar overexerted himself to the point of harming his own health, that would be a serious concern.

‘I trust he wont overuse his power, but I’m still worried.’

To feel more anxious about another’s well-being was unusual for Yuder, especially concerning Kishiar. It was a strange and unsettling feeling, given his usually uneventful life.

“…Be careful.”

Yuder spoke briefly before stepping back. Soon, Kishiar began to earnestly channel his divine power, initiating the healing process for Elpkins.

It took a considerable amount of time before the light finally faded.

“It’s done. That’s all I can do for now.”

Kishiar spoke thus, but Elpkins, upon the completion of the healing, appeared almost fully restored on the outside.

“The external fractures and wounds are mostly healed, but even considering his regenerative abilities, it will still take a few more days of treatment to fully recover.”

Kishiar, after taking a deep breath, staggered as he stepped back. Yuder quickly supported him, noticing the man's face had turned significantly paler in just a short time.

"Are you alright?"

"It's just a misstep… but your concern is so great, it makes me want to stay like this."

"This is no time for jokes."

Hearing Yuder's cold yet worried voice, the man smiled broadly. He then leaned his head against Yuder's hair.

"Um… Of all the powers I possess, this one seems to suit me the least. Even I can't be compatible with everything."

"…"

"But isn't the sense of fulfillment after using such power undeniable? I don't want to hide and never use the power I have. If there's someone in need, it should be used."

Yuder looked up at Kishiar and, after a moment, nodded with difficulty.

"Uh…ughhh… Y-you…who are you?"

Just then, Elpkins finally opened his eyes. Regaining consciousness, he was momentarily frightened by the strangers before him, but soon his surprise turned to astonishment upon realizing his body was fully healed.

"I… I was seriously injured from today's defeat… How did this happen? Did you heal me?"

"Yes."

“How…? No one is supposed to be able to use their powers here…”

“That’s a secret.”

Kishiar silently smiled and placed a finger over his lips. Realizing that these strangers had indeed healed him, Elpkins did not press further on how he had been treated.

Instead, he scanned Yuder and Kishiar with a look of wary yet trembling eyes.

“…You’re not part of the Nukijo gang, are you?”

“No, we’re not.”

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Chapter 661

“…You’re not part of the Nukijo gang, are you?”

“No, we’re not.”

Yuder’s terse response caused Elpkins’ eyes to tremble mercilessly. Instead of offering a lengthy explanation, Yuder decided to succinctly reveal their purpose and identity.

“We are from the Cavalry, here to destroy this place. How many like you are trapped here?”

Although Yuder asked, he didn’t really expect immediate cooperation. Saving someone and being suspicious are two different things. Elpkins was known for his roughness, ferocity, and deep-seated skepticism, so he wasn’t likely to easily believe Yuder’s words.

However, Yuder’s assumption was unusually incorrect this time.

Upon hearing Yuder’s answer, tears suddenly streamed down Elpkins’ eyes.

“…Sob!”

‘…Huh?’

Elpkins, sniffling like a deer, spoke up.

“It can’t be… The Cavalry? Are you really here to save us?”

‘…Really? He believes us this easily?’

Is this really Elpkins? While Yuder hesitated, Kishiar stepped in with a gentle demeanor to respond.

“Yes. If you can’t believe us, would you like to see a token of the Cavalry?”

“No, no. I believe you. I’ve heard that the Cavalry came to Charloin. Those guys I fought with… they might be dead by now…”

Elpkins’ voice wavered before he broke into tears again.

“Sob… sob… Wail.”

His crying was like that of a lost child who had finally found his parents, a mix of sorrow and joy.

Yuder, after a brief exchange with the tearful Elpkins, who was eagerly sharing information about the fighting arena and himself, realized something.

The rough, skeptical Elpkins he remembered was not here.

Present was a naive person, having awakened only a few months ago and still not fully accustomed to his own form.

“I was, you know… a woodcutter. Then one day, I accidentally slipped and almost fell off a cliff, and that’s how I awakened… Sob… Sniff. But because I look like this, people are scared and avoid me…”

Knowing about the existence of the Cavalry, he had planned to head to a big city to find a way to join them, thinking that a place where only Awakeners gathered might offer some solution for someone like him.

However, upon reaching Charloin, Elpkins was swindled by a con artist he met at an inn, losing all his belongings, and eventually ended up in this fighting arena.

“I don’t remember how long I’ve been here. You can’t see the sun rise or set here… But it feels like a long time.”

According to Elpkins, since his arrival, he had fought a total of ten times, and spent more time bound here, lying down in pain. He only met other Awakeners in the waiting room right before or after a fight, but that was enough to exchange some words.

“A person who died here before me said there are about 40 rooms here. He was from another country to the west and had been brought here without knowing what it was… He said he would definitely escape alive. Not that it was of any use.”

“…”

“When I first came here, there were more people who had been deceived and brought here. But lately, there are more first-time participants temporarily brought in from the outside than those trapped here. One of them told me it was because of the Cavalry’s recruitment… I think that person died that day. Never saw them again…”

Elpkins exerted himself to recall every detail he had seen and heard, down to the most trivial aspects. The fact that he sincerely believed in those who had saved him was evidence enough of his efforts.

Among the information he provided, some were already speculated by Yuder and Kishiar based on what they had observed and heard from the outside. However, there were many aspects only someone who had been here for a long time would know, like the detailed structure of the fighting arena and information about the other Awakeners who had passed through it.

After listening to all he had to say, Yuder succinctly summarized the information.

“So, to summarize, the first underground level is a regular fighting arena. The second is for Awakeners and special guests. And from the third level downwards, that’s where they imprison the Awakeners.”

“Yes.”

“The difference between the Awakeners who are locked up and the Awakeners who are not is those who came in unawares and survived the first fight like you, or those who were kidnapped from the outside from the start.”

“That’s right.”

Originally, Yuder and Kishiar too would have been dragged here and imprisoned after surviving their first fight.

‘If they hadn’t realized we were Awakeners with second genders.’

During a meal, after blatantly inquiring and learning about their second gender status, Nukijo looked at them as if they were golden nuggets, with a sly grin that made his satisfaction and intentions all too clear.

From his previous life, Yuder had heard that the fighting arenas often organized fights specifically targeting Awakeners with second genders. The organizers packaged and sold the concept of second gender beings, something beyond the imagination of non-Awakeners, in a highly intriguing and almost salacious manner.

It was also here that the absurd misinformation that the strong scent the Omega Awakeners emit during their heat period supposedly enhances vitality and sexual arousal, originated and spread widely.

‘In a way, this place is where the nightmare of Omega Awakeners began.’

If Yuder and Kishiar had not come here today, it would only be a matter of time before some unfortunate Awakeners with second genders were captured and became the start of that horrific ‘new business.’

Even while suffering in this place, Elpkins had diligently observed and remembered everything about it. This was not only because he had better observational skills than he appeared to have, but also because he still had enough humanity in him not to give up hope of escape.

‘It’s fortunate. If we had arrived any later, when his humanity had been completely eroded… we wouldn’t be seeing him as he is now.’

“Everything I know about this place is just this much. Will this be of any help?”

“Yes, it might be of great help. But let me ask you one more thing.”

“Oh, yes. Ask away. I’ll tell you anything I know…”

“Do you know why the powers don’t work here? It seems like it’s because of someone’s ability among those who are imprisoned. Do you know anything about that?”

“Oh!…”

Elpkins exclaimed loudly upon hearing this. He reflexively startled at the sound of his own voice, then lowered his voice and continued.

“The Nukijo gang just said that powers can’t be used here. I thought it was because of some magic installed in this place, but if it’s due to someone’s ability… I haven’t seen it myself, but there’s something I suspect.”

“What is it?”

“Every time the Nukijo gang brought me back here after a fight, they always had a conversation in front of a certain room. ‘That persons not dead yet, right? It’ll be difficult to manage the others here if that person dies. If that person doesn’t eat, tear open that persons throat and force-feed it…’ Something like that.”

“Hmm.”

Yuder’s eyes narrowed.

‘It’s highly likely that an Awakener with the power of suppression is imprisoned in that room.’

“Do you remember where that room is?”

“My mind was always foggy when I was brought back here, and I could barely see ahead… But I do remember the location of that room. It was the first one I passed every time I descended from the stairs to the second underground floor.”

That meant it was centrally located on the third underground level.

‘Suppression or nullification abilities are often exerted on a targeted basis, but if it’s placed in the center, it might be someone with a range-type ability similar to Nahan. It’s not incredibly wide, but to continuously exert such power day and night without dying… that’s impressive.’

Yuder hadn’t heard of such an ability user when he first started dealing with the illegal gambling arenas in the southern regions in his previous life.

‘He must have died around that time.’

The Nukijo gang, who had created such a place using an Awakener with the power of suppression, would have gained more

money and power by then, devising new ways to more effectively oppress the fighters.

‘By that time… everything was a mess, devoid of any real sense of oppression.’

It was a past that would not recur now. Yuder exhaled briefly, erasing the memories of the past, and gazed at the chains still binding Elpkins.

A range-type ability could be broken by exerting a greater power from within. Yuder was confident that his power was sufficient to break them.

However, doing so might shock the unknown ability owner, who could be in any condition now, potentially endangering their life.

“These chains, I can’t undo them right now, but after tomorrow, you won’t have to wear them again. Just bear with it a little longer.”

“I, I’m fine. Since coming here, I’ve never felt in less pain… I can wait as long as needed. If you need my help, just let me know.”

Elpkins answered with eyes brimming with sincerity. His face, once filled with discontent, now seemed unfamiliar yet more pleasant, akin to a large dog wagging its tail.

Yuder nodded slowly.

“Alright. Then, I would like you to lend a bit of your strength to our plan tomorrow… Can you do that? You might be the only one who can.”

Elpkins’ eyes widened as he answered with a smile.

“Absolutely!”

“Good. After we succeed and escape from here, if you’re interested, come to the Cavalry. We’re currently recruiting.”

Kishiar had painstakingly healed him. Letting him stray off the path again wasn’t an option. It seemed like a good idea to properly nurture and develop his abilities right from the start.

Upon hearing Yuder’s offer, Elpkins inhaled sharply, as if he had never imagined such a possibility, but he didn’t refuse.

After conveying to Elpkins what he hoped he would do the next day, Yuder, supporting Kishiar, leaped up and flew back to the ceiling.

“Are you alright?”

Yuder asked cautiously, and the man, whose pallor had yet to return to normal, nodded with a smile.

“I’m fine. More so, thinking that your recent demeanor is closer to that of Commander Yudrain is truly fascinating.”

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Chapter 662

“I’m fine. More so, thinking that your recent demeanor is closer to that of Commander Yudrain is truly fascinating.”

‘…Commander’s demeanor?’

Yudrain Aile was suddenly speechless when a man who had never seen him as the Commander said that.

“I thought you were quiet because you were not feeling well, is that what you were thinking?”

Since revealing the secrets of his past life, Yuder had been proactive in sharing information about upcoming events, but he rarely mentioned anything about his own self from that time.

Especially his time as a Commander, a period he particularly did not wish to speak of.

But was Kishiar curious about Yudrain Aile from that time?

The current Commander was Kishiar, a fact that would never change. A faint sense of perplexity rose in his eyes at the man’s interest in something that would never happen.

“Ha ha ha.”

Kishiar laughed, seemingly amused.

“I’m sorry, but whatever you were thinking… it would have been completely different from the reality.”

He admitted that in their conversation, he had spoken to Elpkins somewhat condescendingly, as he used to. But it was nothing

compared to his demeanor as a Commander. Back then, he would never have approached anyone directly during a mission.

That was Yudrain Aile's way as a Commander - leave the people skills to others, and focus on what he did best. This meant acting first, smashing everything in sight, and leaving the aftermath to others.

At that time, he hadn't even considered the option of handling things differently. His mind was entirely occupied with the immediate tasks at hand and the subsequent duties that awaited him. Human emotions were unnecessary in his efficient approach to moving forward.

His primary responsibility was to maintain the Cavalry in a strong position for a long time by earning the Emperor's trust and supporting him. Before being a human being, he was the Commander of the Cavalry and the Empire's most potent human weapon.

'Since I worked as the Deputy Commander of Shin for a long time, I hardly ever had a casual conversation with Ever, who I knew the longest.'

He barely knew that Ever enjoyed dancing, let alone her family situation or hobbies, though he remembered how Ever handled battles and injuries.

'Even when people thought I was crazy, I remember she tried to help me, even though she didn't fully believe in my stance…'

Back then, Yuder didn't fully trust even the words of his Deputy Commanders, his peers when joining the Cavalry. He faintly realized that it was an act of kindness only when facing execution.

Even after requesting so many people to believe in his thoughts, he had built walls around those who tried to help, leading to Yudrain

Aile’s unfortunate end.

In the midst of Yuder’s darkening gaze, Kishiar gently but firmly took Yuder’s supporting hand.

His train of thought was interrupted, bringing him back to reality. Their eyes met in the darkness.

“Yes. The image I saw and inferred can’t be exactly the same as reality. That’s obvious. But still, no matter the situation, your attitude towards Awakeners and serving the Cavalry remains the same, doesn’t it?”

A soft voice echoed in his ears.

“The one who created a sanctuary for Awakeners with second genders suffering during their heat period, now offers unique tasks and invites oppressed Awakeners to join the ranks. I believe there’s no significant difference in these two roles. You do it because it’s necessary, not necessarily out of a sense of benevolence.”

This time, his speechlessness was for a different reason.

“…I…”

“Of course, I must admit that your change in tone, perhaps due to meeting an old subordinate, was particularly charming.”

Kishiar said this, smiling faintly.

‘Knowing what I did in my past life… and yet he says such things.’

He wanted to protest, to insist that his time as Commander Yudrain Aile should not be viewed fondly or romanticized, that there should be no similarities between then and now.

But ultimately, Yuder couldn’t utter a word. It was always like this with Kishiar La Orr.

An indescribable feeling weighed heavily inside his chest. Gazing at the man’s face, shrouded in darkness, he felt his heart pounding fiercely.

“Earlier, I sensed a cold pain, but now it’s turned hot again.”

Kishiar murmured, seemingly aware of all the unspoken sensations swirling within Yuder.

“It’s good to feel each other’s intense emotions in moments like this. I wouldn’t be able to guess the depth of emotions beneath this face, just by looking.”

“…”

Yuder realized then that his emotions had seeped into Kishiar. He exhaled deeply, and Kishiar hesitated for a moment before slowly moving his head closer.

“From heat… to yearning. Right?”

Instead of responding, Yuder gazed into his obscured eyes.

While it felt overly honest to convey emotions so directly, since he already knew, it was time to act.

Slowly curving his lips upward, he gently raised his head and their lips met. The contact was brief but felt simultaneously long.

It wasn’t a romantic place or situation, but this brief encounter decidedly cleared Yuder’s mind. And it seemed he wasn’t the only one who felt that way.

“It seems like my vessel has fully recovered. With such a reward, I could use my divine power twice more.”

“Don’t even joke about such things.”

“It’s not a joke, it’s true.”

Kishiar’s face, now smiling, looked genuinely better than before. He stood up without Yuder’s support, indicating some recovery and stability, relieving Yuder’s tension.

They continued their search, following Elpkins’ directions to a room on the third underground floor. Fortunately, it didn’t take long to find.

“This must be it.”

“Yes. It seems to be the right location.”

Lifting a ceiling block, they peered into a small room below, its atmosphere starkly different from the bloodied, horrific room where Elpkins was held.

In a room extravagantly decorated to the point of being suffocating, a woman so emaciated that her bones seemed to protrude lay prostrate. She slowly lifted her head as if she heard the sound of a ceiling block opening and, upon locking eyes with Yuder, opened her mouth as if to scream.

Yuder swiftly leaped down, covering her mouth.

Hmph!

Hmm. I apologize for the sudden intrusion. Rest assured, I’m not here to harm you. Of course, I understand it’s not easy to relax just on my word.

Following suit, Kishiar descended and continued gently, causing the woman, who had been gasping for breath, to roll her eyes and examine them. Yuder, seeing her slightly calmed, spoke up.

Ive come to verify something, so if you assure me you wont scream and alert the Nukijo gang outside, I will let go of your hand. Blink twice if you agree.

After a moment, the woman slowly blinked twice. Yuder removed his hand from her mouth and stepped back. The woman murmured with anxious eyes, Who are you?

We’re from the Cavalry, here to fix this place.

Cavalry? What is that?

Yuder’s gaze sharpened. Her response was one of the worst they had anticipated before coming here.

You don’t know the Cavalry? How long have you been here?

I don’t know. How long its been.

The truth of her words was evident in her hair. The woman, emaciated with a heavy, lavishly adorned dress, had hair so neglected it was a tangled mess.

Her matted hair, gaunt face, bloodshot eyes, and a ridiculously expensive dress that seemed incongruous.

All these factors led to one conclusion.

So, you’re the one using the power to suppress the Awakener’s abilities across this place.

At those words, the woman’s body shook violently.

H-how

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Chapter 663

The woman’s body shook violently.

H-how

As if responding to her shock, the faint mist wrapping around her body suddenly burst explosively.

“Ugh…!”

A groan of unfiltered pain escaped her lips. Once more, dark red blood trickled down from her already scabbed and bruised lips.

‘She’s weak. The slightest backlash from her surprised reaction to us could overwhelm her… But if this continues, she’ll lose control.’

Yuder quickly assessed her condition and placed his hand on her abdomen. He whispered rapidly to her, whose eyes were wide with alarm.

“Focus on the flow of your power. I’ll help you control it. Try to calm your mind, imagine a state of peace. That will help.”

As Yuder drew upon his own strength, the woman’s power, sprawling throughout the space to suppress the Awakener’s abilities, immediately reacted, trying to snuff out the foreign force. However, the power Yuder invoked wasn’t his inherent ability, but a pure, formless essence unique to Awakeners.

This was the same power absorbed from the Red Stone, refined and stored in a medium, and recently used to awaken Emperor Keilusa. Astonishingly, as this power surged within him, the strong suppressive force weakened and dissipated.

‘Just as I thought. The essence absorbed from the Red Stone can assimilate with any Awakener’s power. And I can exploit this opening, however brief.’

Yuder’s understanding of manipulating the Red Stone’s power had significantly increased after his experiences with Kishiar and Hosanna, and through the awakening of Emperor Keilusa. With an instinctual sense beyond explanation, he intensely focused on calming the woman’s power.

The effort was effective, but not without its issues.

“I… I don’t know what to imagine to calm down,” the woman muttered, her face marred by pain.

“What am I supposed to do…?”

Yuder wanted to respond, but concentrating on the power made it difficult to speak. Fortunately, someone far more adept at this was by his side.

“Think back to the time before you came here. Remember how warm the sunlight felt outside, the sensation of walking along the water’s edge, the feelings of running freely across the vast lands. The taste of meals shared with others after a day’s work. What foods did you enjoy?”

“…”

“What and whom did you love?”

Despite the urgency, the woman, hearing this gentle voice, slowly closed her eyes. Shortly after, the dangerously escalating power within her subsided.

The weight of the power suppressing her abilities lifted from their shoulders, and a thin breath escaped the lips of the three.

“Phew.”

When the woman reopened her eyes, tears silently streamed down her cheeks.

Despite her unsteady body, previously sprawled across the table, she righted herself. Her gaze, clearer than before, fixed on Yuder and Kishiar.

“You said you came to destroy this place. Tell me. What is this ‘Cavalry’, and how did you know I was here? Tell me everything.”

“Of course, we’ll explain,” Yuder replied. He and Kishiar then spoke about the Cavalry and the purpose of this fighting arena. After hearing their story, the woman cautiously revealed who she was and how she came to be here.

“My name is Reneve. I am not from the Empire… but from Durban in the west.”

Reneve lived on the border of Durban, a place that, for several years, had been a frequent site of armed clashes with the adjacent Nelarn. It was less a village and more a reluctant home for refugees who had barely survived and could not find death.

Unlike many who lived there, tormented daily by the fear of being struck by an errant arrow, she sought a path of survival. She chose to flee to the Orr Empire, crossing the Great Sarain Forest instead of succumbing to the dread of blind arrows.

However, the broker who promised to take her safely to the Empire and find her a job, taking her meager savings, turned out to be a human trafficker. Reneve, along with others deceived, were transported helplessly like mere cargo to the south. There, they were selected as sacrificial lambs to enter the random combats of the ‘Black Orca’ fighting arena.

Those who ascended the stage before her initially wanted to escape, but their demeanor changed when promised a hefty sum for victory, no matter the means.

Their opponent, however, was an ‘Awakener.’ A man, infamous even before his awakening for his thuggery, now wielded fists hardened like black stone, easily knocking down the trembling sacrificial lambs.

Late pleas for mercy and desperate escape attempts were met with merciless blows. The audience pushed the fleeing participants back, screaming for them to win and not waste the money they had wagered.

The battle ended only when the defeated lay indistinguishable, their bodies beaten into bloody, unrecognizable corpses. Most of those dragged with Reneve died within mere hours.

But as the triumphant thug boasted about the prize money for the final victor, a new, more fearsome Awakener appeared. In a swift move, he split open the thug’s back and belly, killing him instantly.

The shocking scene sent the crowd into a frenzied ecstasy.

Countless new stakes were thrown onto the shoulders of the newcomer.

And so Reneve ascended the stage to face him.

On her way up, forced to pick from the armory, she trembled, barely able to lift the heavy sword that did not suit her. The Awakener she faced up close was terrifying. Seeing Reneve, he chuckled dismissively, ready to use his power as if she were mere prey.

In extreme fear, Reneve closed her eyes.

“And then… suddenly, this power came to me.”

Reneve did not die. When she opened her eyes, the Awakener, overwhelmed by the sudden loss of his abilities, had crashed into the railing and collapsed. Other Awakeners nearby, whether in other fighting stages or waiting areas, were equally confounded and screamed in dismay.

Thus, Reneve became the winner, albeit inadvertently.

She was immediately taken by the subordinates of Nukijo and imprisoned here.

“At first, I tried to escape. But… they threatened to kill Cyril if I didn’t obey.”

“Who is that?”

“The only friend I’ve had since I became an orphan. As good as family. I don’t know if it was good or bad luck, but we were brought here together. But since the day we were imprisoned, I’ve never seen that friend of mine again.”

A dry laugh escaped from her strangely twisted lips.

The day Reneve won the fight, Cyril had not yet appeared in the arena. Nukijo’s gang used Cyril’s life as leverage to detain Reneve, then created a third underground level to confine her there, commanding her to exert her power over the entire space as long as she could.

The captors, it seemed, were not entirely devoid of cunning. In their own way, they had attempted to coax Reneve into willingly joining their ranks. They had bought her expensive clothes and fed her reasonably well, evidently trying to make her life comfortable enough to sway her decision.

But Reneve did not yield to them.

“They never showed me Cyril’s face, not even once,” she said. “I told them I would stay quietly here if they just let me see Cyril once… but they didn’t.”

Within her, a torturous cycle of thoughts churned endlessly the fear that Cyril might already be dead and she was foolishly trapped for nothing, against a slender thread of hope that persisted. The luxury of expensive clothes and meals, once unimaginable, brought her no joy in her current plight.

Trapped in her small room, Reneve withered away endlessly. As each day passed, it became increasingly difficult to exert her abilities. Yet, whenever there was even a slight lapse, the Nukijo gang, like phantoms sensing weakness, would appear to beat her.

“Actually, recently, I’ve been feeling extremely exhausted… reaching my limit, really. I kept thinking that I wanted to die. That was, until you all came here.”

Silence followed.

Reneve burst into nervous laughter, which soon abruptly ceased. Her alternating between crying and laughing was unsettling.

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Reneve burst into nervous laughter, which soon abruptly ceased. Her alternating between crying and laughing was unsettling.

Yuder, observing her seemingly half-mad demeanor, mentally sorted through the information.

…Considering what I've heard, she must have been trapped here before the official announcement of the Cavalry recruitment. A time before the Awakener fighters were separated from random combat… Though she was endlessly exploited in a situation akin to imprisonment, her survival owed to her powerful Awakener abilities. But to her, it was more of a curse.

Given that her homeland was a conflict-ridden danger zone, it was hardly surprising that she knew little about the Cavalry, let alone ordinary Awakeners. Her circumstances were indeed dire.

But that was about to end. Now that he had found her, Yuder had no intention of leaving her in this state. It would be a waste of talent.

Her endurance suggests a strong will. If she gets out, she could achieve tremendous growth.

Yuder highly esteemed Reneve's abilities. Even with her current power, she could be of help to those who had committed crimes or rejected their own abilities.

If she advances further… All awakeners struggling with control would seek her help. She could calm rampages far quicker than I did earlier.

Like all powers, hers had weaknesses. As common to those with mental or emotional abilities, her physical form was fragile, and she

remained ignorant of her own potential.

However, as her power grew, her weaknesses would diminish, and she would rise to be a figure feared by many Awakeners, even without a weapon. Earning money would be just a small added bonus.

Suppressing the powers of Awakeners was no small feat, let alone those as powerful as Yuder and Kishiar. She might not yet grasp the significance of her achievement.

Having made his decision, Yuder spoke up.

“Alright, Reneve. We will help you leave this place. We’ll also check on your friend’s wellbeing. And I believe you could be of great help to us. What do you think?”

“…What do you mean?”

“I suggest we join forces to take down the Nukijo gang.”

Yuder needed allies to increase the chances of success and avoid repeating past tragedies. Reneve, as much as Elpkins, was the right person for this.

Reneve was silent for a moment at the straightforward proposal. Then, unexpectedly, she slapped her own cheek.

Caught off guard, Yuder grabbed her hand as a dry voice emerged from beneath her disheveled hair, half-covering her reddened, swollen cheek.

“It’s strange. It’s all too good to be true.”

“…”

“If this is another dream, I might really bash my head against the wall this time. After all, an organization for Awakeners offering to help

me, to find Cyril and avenge my enemies…”

“There’s no need to slap yourself for that.”

“Then what should I do to believe this is real?”

Reneve was unaware of what a Cavalry was, so even showing him the emblem of the Cavalry would be futile. Demonstrating the power of an Awakener might serve as evidence of being one, yet in the current situation, it seemed unlikely to be of clear help.

Yuder paused briefly before turning to meet Kishiar’s gaze. Unbeknownst to him, his look was more a plea for help.

Kishiar’s eyes softened and curved into a smile.

“Then, shall I show you undeniable proof that this is not a dream?”

Before anyone could question if such a thing existed, the man twisted a magic tool on his hand used for altering facial appearance. The magic overlaying his face dissipated, transforming his brown hair to golden blonde and his ordinary-looking eyes to a striking red hue.

“Ah….”

With his handsome face now honestly revealed, Kishiar looked blankly at Reneve and spoke in his original, elegant manner.

“Now, isn’t this a face too extraordinary to appear in a mere dream?”

“Indeed, it is.”

Kishiar’s genuine appearance, though an absurd method, proved incredibly effective once again.

Reneve immediately accepted the truth that this was not a dream, but reality.

“I’ve heard that the nobles of the Orr Empire have golden hair and striking eyes. Someone of your stature wouldn’t come all this way to lie to someone like me. Fine. Whether you decide to kill or spare me, I’ll be satisfied as long as I can leave here and check on Cyril’s well-being. If there’s anything I can do, just tell me. I’ll try.”

Reneve, having been here a long time without ever venturing outside, knew less about the structure and information of this place than even Elpkins. Yet, her mere existence could be of the utmost help to their plan.

Yuder conveyed to her what he hoped she would do. As they leaped back towards the ceiling hole they had come through, Reneve stared blankly and spoke.

“It’s amazing. I’ve been here so long and never knew one could open that and move around. Even if I had known, with my abilities, I wouldn’t have been able to climb up to such a high place.”

“There’s no need to say such obvious things. Then, as promised, let’s meet again tomorrow, at the appointed time.”

“Yes, tomorrow.”

Reneve murmured the unfamiliar word as if reciting it.

Afterwards, Yuder and Kishiar went on to open all the ceiling blocks in the remaining rooms, checking the locations and identities of those trapped. There were about thirty in total, most bound like animals by the neck and feet. Fortunately, none were as severely injured as Elpkins.

‘Apart from Reneve, there are no others from the West. Most came here lured by tales of the arena, or interested in joining the

Cavalry. It was wise to cut off the human trafficking attempts in Tainu.'

The longest any of them had been there was barely a month. This suggested that many people were quickly expended and perished.

That Elpkins and Reneve had survived this long in such a place was nothing short of miraculous.

The Awakeners were extremely cooperative with Yuder's request. As soon as they revealed their identities as the Cavalry upon leaping down from the ceiling, most shed tears of gratitude and murmured prayers of thanks. Their faces, soaked in relief at the prospect of escaping this hellish place and joy at the possibility of revenge tomorrow, shone with a similar ecstasy to that of Elpkins.

Yuder, having memorized all the information gleaned from those he had rescued, returned to his own room. Positioned directly under a ceiling block that remained open for quick access, he and Kishiar engaged in a discussion about their plans for the following day.

"The Awakeners have said that we will probably start the first fight tomorrow. We can start our work then."

"That seems to be the best way to minimize casualties."

In this arena of the Awakeners, a cruel tradition dictated that newcomers open the first door of combat. It was a brutal strategy, designed to entertain the spectators with the sight of novices' naive attempts turning into a spectacle of shock and horror.

Therefore, according to this rule, either Yuder or Kishiar would be the first to participate in tomorrow's combat.

'Of course, I plan to be the first to go out,' Yuder thought to himself.

“What about the message you sent before entering this place?”

“The ring artifact briefly responded earlier. It seems Nathan has checked it properly.”

Right before entering the Black Orca Tavern, they had sent a message to the Cavalry. The message, from Kishiar, intended for Nathan Zuckerman and the Cavalry, was to be confirmed and then responded to using a one-time use magic tool belonging to the Peletta Knights, which Nathan possessed. Fortunately, it seemed that they had promptly and properly received the message.

‘Everyone will be busy tonight,’ Yuder mused.

The crux of tomorrow’s plan involved coordinated efforts both inside and outside the illegal betting arena. Inside, Yuder and Kishiar, along with other detained Awakeners, would work in tandem with the Cavalry and their external allies outside, squeezing their enemies like a ham sandwiched in bread.

‘To take them all down at once, this is indeed the best way. I’m looking forward to it.’

All that was left was to wait for that moment tomorrow.

Before leaping back to his room, Yuder turned his head towards Kishiar.

The man was smiling at him from the same spot, seemingly no different from usual. However, Yuder felt that he might be experiencing a mix of worry and regret.

“Is there something you’re regretting?” Yuder inquired.

“Caught me, huh? Somehow, after coming all this way together, the thought of returning alone to a cramped room feels a bit lonely,” Kishiar admitted.

Yuder silently gazed downward.

Their current room, akin to a tiny prison cell with nothing but a bed made of old straw wrapped in cloth, seemed slightly better compared to the shack they had previously shared.

“Would you like to come down with me then?” Yuder offered.

“That would be nice,” Kishiar quickly agreed.

‘Considering the start of tomorrow’s plan, this should be fine,’ Yuder thought.

Together, they descended to Yuder’s room. While sitting side by side on the narrow straw bed, Kishiar chuckled repeatedly.

“You’ve exerted a lot of unexpected effort today. Now, don’t do anything else and just rest,” Kishiar said.

“Alright.”

“You have to promise.”

“Would I ever break a promise to you?”

Kishiar pulled Yuder close, resting his head on his shoulder. Despite the cramped room, it felt more than sufficient for them.

Yuder exhaled deeply and closed his eyes for a moment, preparing for the day ahead.

The next day, the sound of Nukijo’s gang unlocking the door echoed through the space.

As Yuder slowly opened his eyelids, he met Kishiar’s already open gaze. Kishiar placed a finger over his lips and smiled mischievously, signaling ‘shush.’

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The next day, the sound of Nukijo’s gang unlocking the door echoed through the space.

As Yuder slowly opened his eyelids, he met Kishiar’s already open gaze. Kishiar placed a finger over his lips and smiled mischievously, signaling ‘shush.’

The gang’s coarse laughter filled the air as they grumbled about the warped door, cursing the fate of a fallen comrade who had caused them such trouble. They speculated about the new arrivals, assuming one to be an Omega, and talked about conducting a thorough examination before sending them out, their words dripping with crude intentions.

As the door finally swung open, two of Nukijo’s men peered in, snickering. “Let’s see, they said he took the drug, but he couldn’t have died already… What? Whats this?!”

Inside, they were met with a shocking sight. Not only was the black-haired Awakener, the second guest, sprawled out as if dead, but the first guest, who should have been securely locked in the adjacent room, lay boldly beside him. The gang members nearly fainted in astonishment.

“How did this happen? Why are you two together?”

“Who knows? I just woke up here,” the first guest replied nonchalantly, yawning. He then criticized the poor conditions of Nukijo’s lodging, mocking its unsuitability for a long stay.

While the gang members were still processing how the first guest had ended up there, the second guest, who had risen leisurely, swiftly struck them under their jaws.

Thud.

A bone-shaking sound echoed as the two men flipped their eyes and collapsed together.

Kishiar, who had been watching quietly, whistled softly and clapped in amusement. “Impressive. They might have to give up on chewing bread with those jaws.”

“Shall we go?” Yuder suggested after rifling through the fallen men’s belongings and seizing a bunch of keys. After ensuring the coast was clear, he exchanged a glance with Kishiar, who had elegantly stepped over the unconscious men to join him.

“Is your hand okay?” Kishiar asked, looking down at Yuder’s hand.

“It’s fine,” Yuder reassured. The Nukijo gang, blinded by greed, had overlooked the most crucial item: Yuder’s enchanted gloves. Relying solely on the power of drugs and Reneve’s abilities, they had carelessly left the gloves, which protected his hands with magic power. Those punches were easier than splitting a piece of wood with his bare hand.

Swiftly, they unlocked the surrounding doors. The first they opened was naturally the one confining Elpkins.

“Ah…”

“I promised I’d come. Stretch out your hands for me to unbind the chains.”

“You really came…”

Elpkins extended his bound hands and feet, his eyes brimming with tears. He gazed at the heavy chains falling to the ground before following Yuder with a fierce and determined look.

“How do you feel?”

“Thanks to your treatment yesterday, I’m feeling much better. My wings have reattached… I think I’ll have no trouble completing the task you assigned me!”

Elpkins vigorously fluttered his wings, sending feathers flying. His feathers, restored to their original color, were large and strong enough to be used as daggers.

“Good, good. Once everyone else is freed, you know what to do next.”

“Yes!”

Shortly after, most of the Awakeners were released. While they moved their newly freed limbs with a mix of tension and joy, Yuder and Kishiar headed toward the last room near the central staircase.

The key, inserted into a lock that seemed never to have been opened before, turned with force, unlocking the heavy door to reveal Reneve inside.

Reneve gazed unwaveringly at Yuder standing beyond the door, without even blinking. Yuder extended his hand towards her.

“Retract your power, and come out now.”

It was as if she awoke from a dream. Reneve shuddered slightly. She slowly moved her weakened body, grasping the edge of the bed to take one step at a time, approaching the doorway.

The thin line dividing the inside and outside of the door.

After staring at it for a long time, Reneve finally bit her lip and stepped over the line, coming outside.

A deep breath, filled with numerous emotions, escaped her lips. She murmured, holding back tears.

“Ive realized it now. Not using my powers feels like this. It’s incredibly, comfortable.”

Reneve was barefoot under her long, flowing skirt. Yuder frowned, guessing why the Nukijo gang had provided her with everything else but shoes.

‘They meant to say, don’t even think about escaping.’

“Wait here a moment.”

Yuder returned to his room and took a pair of shoes from one of the unconscious men. They were slightly large for Reneve, but not too big to wear.

As she put on the shoes, Reneve finally smiled genuinely.

“Thank you.”

“No need for thanks. But, I searched for your friend among the other Awakeners captured here yesterday, and couldn’t find your friend. They might be somewhere else, so I’ll keep looking.”

“Ah…”

Reneve relaxed her clenched fist.

“I see. Thats alright… I thought as much. If my friend had been here, they wouldnt have hidden my friends face from me until the end. Just knowing that is enough for me. I’m truly grateful you searched for and informed me about Cyril. I may not be able to repay this debt even in death, but I will never forget it.”

Yuder hadn’t done anything deserving such grand words. He shook his head briefly and led her to where the others were

gathered.

Reneve, with her unusual attire, drew many glances, but the Awakeners said nothing. Seeing her emaciated form, barely alive, it was clear that she too was a victim of this brutal arena.

“Now, everyone is out as planned.”

Kishiar surveyed everyone with a deliberately casual tone, addressing them with a voice lighter than usual. His face had been transformed, but his speech and mannerisms were no longer that of the ordinary mercenary he had adopted earlier; he was now back to his usual self.

“Now, we have the freedom to use our powers here as we please. This means you can use your abilities freely when necessary. The means Nukijo used to suppress the powers of those trapped here are now gone.”

As he spoke, Kishiar turned to Reneve, flashing her a sly smile, which she returned awkwardly.

“However, as you informed us yesterday, there are still many difficulties inside the arena that could prevent our escape. Therefore, the two of us will head up first. You should move as instructed yesterday, but do not act alone and wait at the agreed-upon location until you receive a signal.”

“Ah, yes, yes!”

The Awakeners responded naturally to his commanding tone, their expressions bewildered. Observing their awkward reactions, reminiscent of the first members of the Cavalry, Kishiar’s lips curved up gently.

“Our goal is to escape from here without leaving anyone behind. Remember, those standing beside you, though forced to fight against

each other until yesterday, are now survivors and comrades from the same peril. Our enemy lies above us.”

With these final words, he quietly raised a finger above his head.

Above them. That was where the arena lay, where countless Awakeners had perished.

The eyes of the Awakeners blazed red. They responded with firm faces, their voices strong.

“Understood!”

“We got it!”

Yuder watched from a step behind, recalling the day Kishiar had first greeted the members of the Cavalry.

Though much had changed since then, some things remained the same.

A quiet yet distinct smile curved the corners of Yuder’s lips as he looked upward.

The two then leaped upwards towards their destination.

What followed was not difficult. They boldly ascended to the second floor, easily overpowering most of those they encountered. Most were caught off guard, assuming they were fellow members of the Nukijo gang, and for those who recognized their faces, it still posed no challenge.

“Huh? What are the Awakeners doing here instead of preparing for the fight?”

The bewildered barrel manager, who had taken the two guests to Nukijo the night before, turned to them.

“We were told to come this way.”

Yuder responded curtly, a question dawning on the man’s face.

“Who told you?”

“My instinct.”

“What?… Ugh!”

The manager was promptly taken down by an object thrust into his back.

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The manager was promptly taken down by an object thrust into his back. It was Kishiar who had effortlessly drawn the old, heavy candlestick that had viciously struck the back of the manager's head, without even touching it.

Yuder, paying no attention to the groaning manager rolling on the floor, opened his mouth.

"Although the information provided by Elpkins and others was useful, this place is indeed structurally complex."

"Well, at least we have someone with a good sense for finding the right people, dont we? That's all that matters."

Their current task was simple. Before the fight began in earnest, they were to identify and individually defeat the few gangs roaming around for welcoming guests or patrolling.

The Nukijo gang, though numerous, were not always present in the fighting arena. Especially now, during the 'waiting time' when participants were supposed to come up, change into the day's designated attire, and select their weapons, there were fewer people around.

Elpkins, who had fought in the arena ten times, explained the Nukijo gang's security policy for guarding the arena and suppressing the participants.

"On the day of the fight, you're blindfolded and taken to the second basement, which leads to the waiting room behind the stage. The only thing you encounter on your way there are narrow, complicated storerooms, and Nukijo's minions periodically patrolling.

All these men are non-Awakeners, but… knocking them down is useless. There's no way to go upstairs from behind the stage."

To escape, one must go upstairs. However, the way up was in front of the stage, which meant crossing the spectator stands.

According to Elpkins, 'all sorts of terrifying things' existed between the stage and the spectator seats.

"I've seen it a few times. People who suddenly try to flee the stage during a fight. When an escapee appears, a magic wall around the stage blocks them first. Even if they're lucky enough to break through, arrows rain down from all directions, and numerous creatures guarding in front of the spectator seats charge at them."

Most couldn't even withstand the arrows and ended up horribly dying like porcupines riddled with arrows. This was due to the large crossbows equipped with formidable arrows, installed at the very top of the spectator stands.

But what would happen if someone managed to withstand all that and still tried to escape?

Elpkins knew the answer.

"I saw it happen just once. A really strong person. He nearly escaped by taking a hostage among the esteemed guests, but… He suddenly died."

"Suddenly died?"

"Exactly. As if killed by something invisible."

Visible attacks could be countered, but invisible ones, unknown and therefore more frightening. Elpkins, naively unfamiliar with magic, believed it to be a tremendous magic power, but Yuder thought otherwise.

There’s only one guess. An awakener with excellent stealth skills hidden among the guards.

Kishiar also asserted that it was exceedingly difficult to execute such an attack and murder with the current magic powers.

“Setting up a protective magic circle around the fighting stage is easy. But for today’s mages to acquire a stealth magic tool made by mages centuries ago and use it to perfectly conceal and attack… that’s nearly impossible.”

In this manner, the number of Awakeners hidden in stealth guarding the front of the stage remained unknown. This was mainly because most, like Elpkins, perished before they could discern this much.

Therefore, Yuder and Kishiar decided to first clear the area behind the stage, then wait until enough guests had arrived to execute a pincer movement both inside and outside the arena.

The backstage, intricately narrow and complex, was designed to hinder the escape of the fighting participants. Conversely, this meant it was also an ideal structure for them to isolate and defeat their opponents one by one.

“It’s actually a blessing in disguise that no one notices even when their comrades disappear one by one.”

The Nukijo gang, likely relaxing upstairs at that moment, couldn’t even begin to imagine what was unfolding beneath their feet.

“Uh… Ugh…”

Just then, the manager, who had been unconscious for a while, let out a groan and lifted his head. Feeling the blood flowing from the back of his head, he screamed in terror.

“Ugh… Aaaah! These bastards… trying to escape…! Hey…! Is anyone there? Help me!”

But no matter how loudly he cried, no one came. The manager’s voice gradually faded and finally silenced, realizing the strangeness of his colleagues’ absence.

Yuder, who had been quietly observing, finally spoke.

“I was curious how long you’d call out, but you have even less stamina than Elpkins.”

The manager, not knowing who that name belonged to, was too frightened to ask by the dark, emotionless eyes that coldly observed him.

Those eyes, more impassive than if they were staring at a ball, filled him with utter terror. They looked down at the bleeding man without pity or thrill of violence, just as one would look at a mere task to be done.

“Did-did I introduce you to the boss yesterday and that’s why you’re doing this? I had no choice! It wasn’t me who decided to lock you down there, it was the boss’s orders and I didn’t do anything…!”

“…”

“Really, I didn’t do anything…”

After desperately trying to justify himself for a while, the manager once again fell silent under Yuder’s gaze.

“Is that it? Go on, say more.”

“Uh… Ugh…”

He instinctively realized that whatever he said would not get through to the men before him. They were merely curious to see how

long he would keep screaming, nothing more, nothing less.

Yesterday, he thought they were just simple, gullible fools, but now, looking up from his prone position, their faces seemed as emotionless as death itself.

Giving up on feigning pity, the manager screamed in defiance.

“Damn… You filthy homosexuals, catamite! I don’t know where you came from, but there’s no need to bother hiding from me! The boss will catch and kill you!”

“Is that so?”

And then, the reaper finally passed his judgment on the manager.

“Whether there’s anything to come out of dealing you, we’ll just have to see. It’s fortunate that you still have some energy left. I had many questions to ask.”

Yuder, genuinely pleased, grabbed the manager by the scruff of his neck as he tried to spew more insults. The manager flailed in pain as Yuder’s hand wrapped around him like the wind.

“Ugh… Aaaah, Aaaaah! Help me!”

“Sure. The Awakeners you tricked and dragged here probably said the same.”

Behind Yuder, who stood with his fists clenched, the water and fire, air and earth simultaneously shimmered in an eerie dance. Witnessing this spectacle, the manager’s face turned ashen, as if he was on the verge of fainting.

Soon, a scream echoed through the empty warehouse, unheard by anyone else.

“Feels refreshing to have used my body after a while,” Yuder mused.

He cracked his neck and looked down at the sprawled manager. In the hellish predicament of facing punishment whether he responded or not, the manager quickly abandoned all loyalty and, begging for his life, readily spilled all the information he knew.

“Where is Nukijo now?”

“Up… upstairs…”

“Do you know when he comes down to the fighting arena?”

“When the first fight starts, he will come down… It’s always been that way.”

As is often the case with those from the backstreets, the Nukijo gang had a very weak sense of solidarity and lacked anything resembling loyalty.

Thanks to the manager, Yuder learned that Nukijo had been vigorously promoting their ‘first fight’ scheduled for today, and as a result, numerous ‘esteemed guests’ were expected to visit overnight. Everything was going as he had hoped.

Nukijo hasn’t noticed the movements of the Cavalry yet. Seems like everyone on that side is doing well.

“I… I’ve told you everything now… Please, let me live… That’s all I know…”

“Who said anything about killing you? I have one more question, so answer it correctly.”

The final question was about the Awakeners with stealth abilities guarding the arena.

“There are Awakeners among those guarding this place, right? Who are they?”

Yuder deliberately asked as if he already knew the fact, rather than merely speculating. The bewildered manager, his mind not functioning properly, took the bait as Yuder had anticipated.

“I don’t know much about that… Even the boss doesn’t tell me…”

‘So, it was a shot in the dark, but it turns out I was right.’

As Yuder quietly scraped his foot against the ground, the manager screamed and responded.

“I’ve never seen them, I really don’t know! How can I know who they are when they have the ability to become invisible!”

‘The ability to make himself invisible, huh?’

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Chapter 667

“The ability to make himself invisible, huh?” pondered Yuder, his eyes narrowing. As he gazed towards Kishiar, the latter met his gaze with a solemn expression.

There were various types of stealth abilities. Most commonly, they involved remaining motionless in shadows or amidst the terrain, briefly concealing one’s form. The kind that allowed movement while hidden was exceedingly rare. Even rarer were those abilities that enabled attacking while unseen, requiring extensive training to be practically useful in combat.

Among these were Nahan’s illusion abilities, which blurred the observer’s perception, and Gakane’s skill to hide within his shadow clones.

“A capability to become completely invisible and launch unseen attacks, you say,” Yuder mused. “That must be a form of stealth. A rare ability indeed.”

An adept practitioner of stealth could erase not only their presence but also anything they touched, including weapons, clothing, and even their presence. This made them capable of deadly attacks with minimal effort, standing as the pinnacle of stealth abilities.

I hadn’t thought such a talent existed at this time yet… but it appears I was mistaken.

The manager admitted to knowing only of the ability, with no knowledge of the wielder’s name or appearance. Prodded for more information, he finally recalled a crucial detail amid tears and sobs.

“Nobody knows when and where that Awakener appears, only emerging when needed… Rumors suggested he might even be among us. I, too, believe it likely, given the boss’ nature…”

“Are you saying this Awakener works among you, only revealing his power in dire situations?” Yuder inquired.

“Yes, exactly,” the manager affirmed, tearfully insisting his limited encounters with the Awakener were genuine, despite his broken speech.

Yuder and Kishiar exchanged glances once more.

There’s a possibility… I can’t recognize every Awakener on sight. If he blended in with the Nukijo gang without using his powers, it’s understandable I wouldn’t know, Yuder thought.

Until now, those they had encountered and defeated were all non-Awakeners.

According to Elpkins, the stealthy Awakener had appeared among the audience, particularly near the esteemed guests. This suggested he was assigned to protect important spectators and only acted when necessary.

Such an individual is most effective as a hidden asset rather than an overt force. It makes managing the fighting arena easier and keeps the subordinates alert. They’ve thought this through, Yuder noted.

Yet, there was still a way to deduce his identity.

Breaking his silence, Yuder spoke again. “Do you know when this Awakener first appeared? If not, when did you first see him?”

“It was after this underground second-floor arena was completed. The first time an escape attempt was made, that’s when I saw him.

That much is certain.”

“Are the guards in the audience always the same people during these fights?”

“Indeed? Ah… Yes. We occasionally rotate the guards, but the boss prefers using proven ones in such places…” the manager hesitantly began.

“No need to share his opinions,” Yuder interjected sharply, stepping firmly on the manager’s hand. As the hand seemed to sink into the ground, the manager screamed and writhed in agony. Despite his struggles, the ground engulfed his hand like a swamp, drawing more of him in.

“Tell me everything you know about those guarding the VIP seats.”

“I’ll tell you, just please, release my hand!”

“I believe I said answers first.”

“Aah!”

Only after a harsh retribution for his stupidity did the manager stammer out a coherent response.

“The guests in the VIP seats are quite particular about faces… So, the same few always get assigned… Today, it was definitely Regina, Jagg, Vic, Kess, Persaila, and…!”

There were about 100 seats in the VIP section. The manager mentioned approximately ten guards.

“Were all the ones you named working there since the second floor was first established?”

“Not all of them… Some have been there since the beginning, others were added a few months ago…”

The manager spewed out everything he could remember about the guards in the VIP section. At this point, he couldn’t even think why he was being questioned so; all he desired was to escape the clutches of this devilish man.

Though the information was somewhat disorganized, Yuder wasn’t particularly concerned. He had someone by his side capable of making sense of even such scattered details.

“It seems we’ve extracted everything of use.”

“So, now that I’ve told you everything, can you please… release my hand?”

“Very well. I’ll let you go.”

Hope flickered in the manager’s eyes at Yuder’s cool agreement. However, the next moment brought a swift kick to his face.

“Never said I’d let you go while you were conscious.”

Leaving the now unconscious manager behind, Yuder turned to Kishiar. The latter, who had been watching Yuder extract information with a smile, spoke up.

“If the stealthy one is guarding the VIP seats, then he must be among those who joined when this second floor was established. According to the manager, there are three such individuals. We’ll soon find out which one is the Awakener.”

“The Awakener might possess more than mere stealth abilities, perhaps even true invisibility. Be cautious if it comes to a fight.”

Yuder then left the warehouse, using the information extracted from the manager to navigate effortlessly to a small armory near the waiting rooms. This place housed weapons loaned to participants without their own.

Among these, Yuder's sword lay abandoned.

The manager mentioned that Nukijo only cared for the jewels inlaid in the weapons, neglecting the swords themselves. Fortunately, I retrieved it before they could discard it.

Had the Nukijo gang had any discernment, they would have realized that the most valuable part of this sword wasn't the red gem but the sheath itself. Plain and unadorned, the sheath was crafted from materials formidable enough to be used as a weapon in its own right.

Yuder, having retrieved his sword, did not initially worry about its potential loss, but once it was secured at his waist, a sense of reassurance washed over him.

I shall make them pay dearly for daring to take my sword, he vowed silently.

The weapon storage was close to the fighting stage. The distant clamor of voices suggested the audience was steadily filling the seats.

It would likely take some time before they discovered what had transpired behind the stage.

"So, what's next… the waiting room?" Kishiar, who had helped Yuder dust off his sword, asked with a sly smile.

"Yes."

"I suppose I should pick a weapon for myself as well."

Kishiar surveyed the area and picked up an old, rusty sword from the ground. It was so corroded and notched it could have been mistaken for a club, but in his hands, it might as well have been the finest weapon, unbreakable by anyone in the world.

“Will that suffice?” Yuder inquired.

“Yes, this weight is just fine. It’s perfect for what I have in mind.”

Swinging the sword lightly a few times, it cut through the air with a fearsome sound, quickly fading away. They then headed towards the waiting room, which remained oblivious to the events that had unfolded.

Meanwhile, Nukijo was receiving an unusual report from a subordinate.

“What? The Southern Army of the Empire has entered Charloin? What are you talking about? Their main force is in Lakota, not Charloin.”

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Chapter 668

Meanwhile, Nukijo was receiving an unusual report from a subordinate.

“What? The Southern Army of the Empire has entered Charloin? What are you talking about? Their main force is in Lakota, not Charloin.”

“That’s what I’m saying. For some reason, they entered without any prior notice. The Charloin garrison reported it. So I came to inform you right away, boss.”

“As long as the Lord of Charloin holds his ground, they shouldn’t have been able to just enter like that… This is troubling, Urachil. The unknown cause is concerning. And it had to happen today of all days, when we have a big fighting event with many guests”

The revered Swordmaster, General Gino Bordelli, led the main base of the Orr Empire’s Southern Army, located far from Charloin in Lakota. There were Empire troops stationed in Charloin as well, but they generally got along well with the Nukijo gang. They had been exchanging favors through backdoor deals for years, so there was no worry about enforcement or punishment.

However, the Empire troops that suddenly entered Charloin today were from the main base in Lakota. They were strangers to the Nukijo gang and could pose a threat if things went wrong, stirring Nukijos anxiety and caution.

In fact, Gino Bordelli, known for his integrity, had long wanted to crack down on the crime syndicates in Charloin. But the Lord of Charloin, deeply in love with money and equally disdainful of Bordelli, had been firmly resisting, preventing any such misfortune from happening so far.

‘They wouldnt have come for small fries like us But better safe than sorry.’

Today was a special day with important guests. Keeping their identity secret, ensuring their safety, and ensuring they had a good time was crucial for Nukijo.

First, he needed to find out why the main Southern Army unit had come here.

Nukijo frowned, deep in thought. He preferred to offer praise to his underlings rather than resort to violence.

“Good job coming to inform me right away. Who exactly told you this news? Til? Or maybe Bains?”

“It was Mehill. From the garrison’s entry and exit security team.”

“Ah, that guy. Right. So he heard the news early because of the security team. Tell the boys to give him ‘sweets and alcohol’ as a token of gratitude. And ask him for more details when they deliver it.”

“Understood.”

Nukijo’s men quickly moved, taking money hidden in cigarette packs and expensive alcohol, heading to the Charloin garrison’s security team. Soon, new information reached Nukijo’s ears.

“Boss. Ive found out the identity of the Southern Army unit that arrived today.”

“Let’s hear it.”

“They’re a newly formed unit called the Awakeners or something.”

“What? Awakeners?”

“Yeah. It’s a temporary unit, made up only of soldiers who have ‘awakened’. It hasn’t been officially announced yet, but it seems they were sent for a light visit to the Cavalry’s branch. Since General Bordelli is a supporter of the Emperor, the Lord of Charloin permitted their entry.”

“I see”

“They went straight to the Cavalry’s branch upon arrival. The unit is small, not even thirty men, and the guy leading them is a young lad, who was just a soldier until recently. Should we send someone to investigate more?”

“No, thats enough.”

Nukijo finally let his guard down. Even with just this much information, it was clear that the issue had nothing to do with them, so he felt no need to investigate further.

However, had he chosen to delve a bit deeper, he would have heard the astonishing news that the once noisy front of the Cavalry Southern Branch building had become eerily quiet since that day.

Also, there were reports of the Southern Army Special Forces Unit, who visited the Cavalry on a courtesy call, exchanging serious greetings with the Cavalry members before entering as if they were about to start ‘work’.

The Cavalry Southern Branch was enveloped in a heavy and silent atmosphere.

Among those in Cavalry uniforms, there were some in slightly unfamiliar uniforms. These were members of the Imperial Southern Army Special Forces Unit, who had rushed to their aid upon request. The team leader was a young man with sky-like hair and black eyes, exuding a pleasant demeanor.

“Hello, Cavalry members. I am Sunz, Commander of the 23rd Special Forces Unit Awakener Brigade of the Imperial Southern Army. This is Deputy Commander Emon. Ideally, we would take our time over a meal and discuss how to assist you in your life down south, but circumstances make that difficult.”

As Sunz introduced himself with a gift in hand, Kurga of the Cavalry extended his hand for a handshake. Kurga’s bear-like stature made the handshake appear as a small human making contact with a giant bear.

“Its not important. Just the fact that the Southern Army sent you so promptly upon receiving the Commander’s message is enough for us.”

“Hahaha. Truly, you are members of the Cavalry.”

“I read about you in a letter from the Commander. It mentioned youve previously worked with us on a mission.”

“Yes, that’s right. I can’t divulge the details of the mission, but it was a great experience. It was there I first met a remarkable Cavalry friend who has greatly advised Emon and me.”

“Who might that be?”

At Kurga’s curious inquiry, Sunz turned his gaze towards Emon standing beside him. Both men smiled simultaneously, recalling old times.

“Its Yuder Aile. Ah, he has received a title now, so should I address him as Baron Aile?”

“Ah… Yuder wouldnt mind that. He always told us to call him as we always have.”

“Just like Yuder. The last time I saw him was at the Harvest Festival a few months ago when we were summoned to the capital. I’m very happy to think that I will be able to see him soon and congratulate him in person.”

At the mention of Yuder being an old friend who had once helped Sunz and Emon, the faces of all the Cavalry members softened. The same was true for the faces of the Awakener Brigade soldiers standing behind Sunz and Emon.

With a good first impression established, the conversation continued smoothly.

“The Commander is currently on a secret reconnaissance mission with Yuder, infiltrating an illegal betting fight club. Its a dangerous place, and he believes its best to eradicate it immediately.”

“The illegal betting fight club has been a thorn in the south’s side for years. It’s heartbreaking that its now targeting Awakeners and expanding its scale to be more provocative.”

“Dont worry. They made a grave mistake by messing with the Awakeners and the Cavalry.”

“We will certainly help as well! But even if we manage to defeat those scoundrels today, dealing with the aftermath could be more challenging, especially with the nobles and the stationed army, including the Lord of Shaloin, backing them up. How does the Cavalry intend to handle this aspect?” Sunz asked, his face etched with concern.

“It is well-known that our General Gino and the local Lord do not get along. Everyone is more worried about the aftermath than the actual fight,” Sunz added.

“You need not worry about that either,” replied Kurga, his expression impassive.

“The Commander has already instructed us on every aspect of that matter. To elaborate a bit more… the solution to such issues was almost completely resolved as soon as Yuder arrived yesterday.”

“Really?”

“What does that mean…?”

Sunz and Emon blinked in confusion, unable to fathom the meaning of his words.

“Its too lengthy to explain now, but you’ll understand in due time. Just know that you dont need to worry about that part. Trust in our Commander and Yuder, and when the signal is given, just do as you please.”

Sunz smiled awkwardly, wondering if it was really alright to be so unconcerned. He looked around at the faces of the Cavalry members and, seeing their unworried eyes, he inwardly admired their confidence and faith.

‘Everyone’s morale and belief are truly remarkable… How long will it take for our unit to reach this level? We still have a long way to go.’

“Now, it seems its about time. Shall we get going?” Sunz proposed.

“Oh, yes.”

“When you arrive there, you will also meet the Peletta Knights, waiting in position. You will be introduced to Nathan Zuckerman, the

Adjutant of the Commander. I'll make sure you get a chance to greet him."

"The Peletta Knights are here too? That's impressive."

During the hasty journey in response to the sudden request for assistance from the Cavalry yesterday, Sunz's heart had been pounding. But now, it felt like it might burst out of his chest.

He was about to meet Yuder Aile again and proudly show him his promotion, this time as a supporter of the Cavalry. Sunz rose eagerly from his seat and, after changing his attire under their guidance, he joined the Cavalry members and quickly stepped outside.

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Chapter 669

Something felt amiss.

Not long ago, Jack, a boy who had escaped from the Star of Nagran's southern stronghold, now a successful candidate in the first round test of the Cavalry's second recruitment, looked at the scenes unfolding before his eyes and thought to himself.

'It seems like things are going well, but why does something feel off?'

To the boy, yesterday seemed like a day where all hardships were washed away, leaving only success.

He had successfully escaped from the base with his older brothers and sisters who were with him from the west, arriving at Charloin without anyone getting hurt, and confidently submitted his application to the Cavalry. He was very nervous just before entering the branch building, but the anxiety disappeared like washed away after receiving the first round acceptance.

Later, returning to the lodging, the owner suddenly said, With many visitors to the city, we are running out of space. Either pay more, or you'll have to leave, which did strain his finances, but luckily, he found a good solution.

In this bustling southern metropolis, there existed a betting arena where anyone could earn money by winning fights.

With no difficult rules to follow and just winning to earn money! For them, who had survived the harsh western jungles and even faced monsters, this seemed all too easy.

‘We owe a lot to Dagon and the others for bringing us this far. It’s our turn to repay them! I just need enough money to stay until the final pass of the second test. A few fights should do it. It won’t take long, and nobody will notice.’

Jack went to the place with several other Awakeners of similar age. Upon learning they were Awakeners, the arena suggested they participate in an exclusive fight for Awakeners. Apparently, it was much riskier for non-Awakeners to fight against Awakeners, hence the separate arena, and the prize money for winning was incomparably higher there.

‘This should be enough with just one fight!’

The young, naive Awakener, not yet tainted by the world, excitedly agreed to participate and signed the contract. The manager, Regina, who helped them with the contract, seemed somewhat distrustful of their ability, asking several times, Can you really fight?

It was fine. Once they saw them fight, they would realize how needless their worries were.

‘So, it was good to come here today under the pretext of looking around the lodging…’

Regina, whom they met yesterday, had taken the first-time participants to the underground waiting room for fighters. Seeing their faces, she made a slightly complex expression and said, ‘Well, now that you’re here, you have to figure out the rest,’ and then she took the lead.

From that moment, Jack felt a subtle sense of strangeness.

Upon arriving in the waiting room, they received slightly embarrassing clothing, like something out of an old tale. They were told to wear it because today’s fight was set in ancient times. The

costume, revealing the chest, belly, and legs, seemed odd, but they wore it, thinking it was just for once.

While they struggled with the clothes they had never worn before, Regina was also very busy moving around.

“It should be about time for them to come up. Why haven’t they yet? Something’s odd…”

Looking at the inner door of the waiting room, Regina kept saying something felt strange. Jack approached her and asked quietly.

“What feels strange to you?”

Regina suddenly turned around, startled. For a moment, her figure seemed to blur and distort before becoming clear again, leaving Jack blinking in confusion.

What was that? But before he could voice his question, she warned him with an uncharacteristically cold face.

“Sorry, but it’s a very busy time right now. Could you refrain from approaching without notice? You might startle someone enough to get stabbed to death in a place like this.”

“Ah, yes… I’m sorry.”

“No need to apologize. The problem lies with the participants who haven’t arrived yet.”

“Ah… So we weren’t the last ones?”

“Of course not. If there was a problem, we would have been notified. But I can’t go beyond this point…”

Regina, with her hand on her forehead, murmured something, her eyes darkening for a moment. Jack felt a chilling sensation, but she soon regained her composure.

“Anyway, this is not something first-time participants like you should worry about.”

Jack acknowledged her statement, but internally, he still felt something was off.

What was this feeling? His friends and he were here in this grand and magnificent place for just one fight to earn some money and leave. But everything, from the attitude of Regina, the manager, to the atmosphere of this space, felt strangely eerie.

He was about to express his uneasy feeling to his friends when the door to the waiting room opened.

Several people entered all at once, their experienced aura indicating they had spent a lot of time in a place like this. The eyes of the first-time participants widened in awe.

‘Wow… Are we supposed to fight against these people?’

Suddenly, the monsters they faced in the great wilderness seemed trivial. While Jack and his friends were feeling intimidated, Regina approached them. It seemed these were the ‘yet-to-arrive participants’ she mentioned.

She looked around the back of the participants as if searching for someone, then sighed in frustration.

“Did they send up the participants and go off to drink again…”

Apparently, another manager who was supposed to escort them hadn’t shown up, and that annoyed her. Regina counted the newcomers with a sharp gaze. They all looked extremely dark and exhausted, brimming with a killing intent.

Jack felt an indescribable chill as he observed them, all silent as if bound by a rule of absolute silence.

‘…Why does this feel so wrong? Is this arena really okay?’

Suddenly, he felt a piercing gaze. Turning, he saw it came from a particularly grim figure among the silent Awakeners, wearing a dark hood, exuding an ominous presence.

‘What… Why is he staring at me?’

It felt like a persistent, sharp gaze, as if he had caught something that shouldn’t be there.

Jack, overwhelmed by the intense and frightening scrutiny, the likes of which he had never felt before, discreetly hid among the others. He sincerely hoped that this dark-hooded Awakener wouldn’t be his opponent in the fight.

“Everyone’s here now.”

After counting all the participants, Regina clapped her hands to gather attention and began briefing them on several points. Her words, seemingly rehearsed and emotionless, appeared well-packaged on the surface but subtly implied, ‘If you die here, the arena is not responsible.’

“Right next to this place is the weapons depot. Participants who need weapons can choose from there. Once the fight starts, those who are called can head out. There’s no one to guide the proceedings; you’ll figure it out once you go out. That concludes my role here.”

Regina no longer smiled. Turning her back on the participants, she left without any formal farewell, her demeanor as cold and unceremonious as could be.

As if she would never see them again…

The waiting room, now left only with the participants, became as quiet as the depths of the ocean. Jack, rubbing his sweat-dampened palms on his trouser legs, seriously considered whether he could still withdraw from the fight.

'…But I can't. Dagon and the others have put in so much effort to bring us here…'

Jack reflected on how much he and the others owed to Dagon and their older companions. He also thought of their happy faces when they would return with the money earned here.

'My parents abandoned me, calling me a monster, but my brothers and sisters accepted me. I can't run away. How can I become a Cavalry member with the spirit of someone who runs away even here?'

Clenching his fists, he looked around and saw other Awakeners from the Star of Nagran nodding in agreement. They took deep breaths and wished each other good luck.

Suddenly, the sound of a large instrument burst from the concealed stage, accompanied by a noise like exploding fireworks. Enthusiastic cheers penetrated even the waiting room.

Startled, Jack quickly calmed his racing heart with a hand pressed to his chest.

'I just hope I'm not the first one up…'

"The first up is~!! A special guest that everyone here is eagerly awaiting~ The second gender! The second gender Awakener~!!!"

Exclamations of surprise, cheers, applause.

And then, Jack looked up in shock.

‘Second gender Awakener? Who is that?’

The answer came quickly from a loud voice echoing from afar.

“Whether he’s an Omega or an Alpha, you’ll see with your own eyes! His name is, Yudrain!”

“…”

In the waiting room, cold as if in another world, one person let out a low, short breath. It sounded almost like a scoff. Turning his head, Jack realized that it was the same Awakener who had earlier stared at him for no apparent reason, and his shoulders tensed in alarm.

‘That person…?’

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Chapter 670

‘That person…?’

During his stay at the Star of Nagran outpost, he had seen several second-gender Awakeners. Consequently, he knew well that those possessing second genders were not particularly special, whether they were Alpha or Omega Awakeners, and it was impossible to distinguish them just by appearance.

However, the Awakener now being called to step forward… He was a bit doubtful whether he truly had a second gender.

The atmosphere was so menacing, and the air so oppressively heavy, that it raised his suspicions.

A man standing beside the person called Yudrain was incredibly tall and had a vague expression. His arms crossed, he said,

“Oh, what a pity. I was hoping to be the first to go.”

…Was this an open provocation? As cold sweat formed on Jack’s back, Yudrain turned his head and replied,

“It wouldn’t have mattered if I wasn’t the first; I would have made myself the first anyway.”

Good heavens. This was an escalation.

Fortunately, the tall man seemed not too upset by this, as he let out a low chuckle and then…

“Hmm. In that case, I hope fervently to be your opponent.”

…He openly expressed a desire to fight!

Before the combat competition even began, Jack tensed up, fearing these two might start brawling. The focus of others in the room covertly shifted to them.

Yudrain said nothing for a moment, just gazing at the tall man. Jack thought he looked like a fearsome beast, sizing up whether his opponent was bite-sized or not.

“…Do you truly wish for that?”

Do you really want to fight me? What a laughable fool. I’ll accept your challenge anytime. This was how Jack interpreted Yudrain’s words.

“I always do. An opportunity like this at such a venue isn’t common. Of course, what I’ll offer isn’t something mundane like a sword or fist.”

Yes, I’ve always wanted to fight. Now is the perfect time. I won’t face you with ordinary, common weapons. Wait and see! The tall man’s words were interpreted in this way.

A slight twist appeared at the corner of Yudrain’s lips.

“Given what you’ve said, I’m starting to look forward to the next turn.”

“Indeed. Let’s see how my luck plays out.”

With that, their conversation came to an end.

Jack didn’t even consider the possibility that they knew each other. He just fervently hoped he wouldn’t be Yudrain’s opponent.

‘He looks incredibly strong. I definitely don’t want to face him!’

But fate did not favor Jack. Historically, he had always been the unlucky one, invariably ending up in the very situation he hoped to

avoid.

“And who shall face himlet’s see the result of the first draw! Oh!”

With an exaggerated voice, the name of Yudrain’s opponent, the Awakener to inaugurate the stage today, was announced from outside the stage.

“The one who will start the stage today with the Second Gender Awakener is~!a young newcomer challenging this fighting arena for the first time! An Awakener with beast-like power, able to freely reveal ears, tail, teeth, and claws! His name isJack!”

A cacophony of sounds, almost deafening, reached the backstage. Jack was so startled he nearly jumped off the floor. His friends around him cast anxious and worried glances at him.

“Jack! It’s you!”

“…Are you sure you’re okay? If it’s too hard, you might consider forfeiting…”

Jack felt terror at the predatory gaze Yudrain fixed on him, as if assessing his prey. He wanted to retreat, but the thought that emerged in his mind was the joyful faces of his comrades when he returned with the prize money from winning here.

Silently, Jack clenched his fists and, with gritted teeth, stepped forward.

Just as he was about to head towards the stage, a door opened behind him. Entering were a skeletal woman dressed in a floral dress and, in stark contrast, a winged man with a very distinctive appearance.

‘What’s this? Weren’t all the participating Awakeners already here?’

Like Jack, the other first-timers who had entered from outside were puzzled, but the Awakeners who had come up from the lower floor said nothing.

‘…Well, I don’t know. It’s not my problem; they must have a reason for arriving now…’

Jack’s brief wonder quickly dissipated. He was too preoccupied with the immediate challenge ahead. With stiff limbs, he moved towards the stage, following Yudrain. The tall man who had provoked a confrontation earlier spoke slyly from behind.

“It’s a pity I’m not your opponent.”

He was truly detestable, consistently displaying hostility towards Yudrain, seemingly harboring a deep grudge.

“We’ll meet again soon enough.”

“Yes… Be careful. I’d be really sad if you were even slightly injured when we meet again.”

This was a traditional curse of hatred, implying ‘Stay healthy until you die at my hands, not someone else’s.’ Jack wondered why he hadn’t been chosen first, looking slightly downcast…

Fortunately, Yudrain moved on without responding further to the man. Jack hurried up the stairs, following him. As they ascended to the stage, the bright lights and cheering grew louder, making Jack’s heart pound so hard it felt like his ribs might break.

“How old are you?”

Yudrain, whom Jack hadn’t expected to speak, suddenly asked. Though his gaze remained forward, the question was clearly directed at Jack. Was he trying to gain the upper hand already? Jack

flinched, then straightened his shoulders, trying to appear as strong and fierce as possible in his reply.

“I’m eighteen! Why do you ask!”

“Why try to earn money here at such a young age? There must have been other things you could do.”

“…What’s it to you? It’s none of your business!”

“Does everyone else know you’re here?”

…What was this about? It almost seemed like Yudrain knew Jack had companions other than his family. Though something felt off, Jack tried to brush aside the odd feeling and showed an even fiercer expression.

“I don’t need anyone’s permission! I’ll just win, take the money, and leave!”

“So you sneaked out without permission. You’re really clueless, aren’t you?”

“…Are you insulting me?!”

“Yes.”

“And you’re here to make money just like me!”

As Jack retorted heatedly, Yudrain narrowed his eyes. His expression was cool, almost smiling, but not quite.

“Well…”

“What now?”

“This is a fighting arena where killing is allowed. Do you understand what that means?”

“…”

“If you had ever seriously considered what might happen to you after death, even once, you wouldn’t have come here. You had your last chance to turn back after signing up yesterday, but you chose to ignore it. If things were as they should be, you wouldn’t have had the chance to ponder such things before dying.”

In that moment, as Yudrain spoke, his aura settled into an indescribable stillness. Despite his presence right in front of Jack, it felt as if an invisible blade hung just above his throat.

The gravity of his words left no doubt that they were no jest…

Jack, unable to ponder how Yudrain knew of his contract from the previous day, stopped in his tracks. Yudrain, halting alongside him, slowly turned and began to speak.

“However… as the person who taught me said, everyone can make mistakes. What’s important is what comes after.”

“…”

“So, observe carefully the mistake you’ve made today. No one can be sure if such an opportunity will come again in life.”

Yudrain looked older than Jack, but the difference seemed only a few years at most. Yet, from him emanated an overwhelming pressure that couldn’t be denied.

What were those eyes, bearing the weight of years like an elder with snow-white hair?

What was this dreadful feeling, like standing before high-ranking figures, impossible to refute?

As Jack remained speechless, Yudrain turned away and moved towards the place filled with low curses and cheers.

“He’s out!”

“Finally! Is that the Second Gender Awakener?”

Yudrain had stepped onto a stage that had claimed many Awakeners’ lives. The square stage, adorned with bright strings and fences, resembled a plate holding a cake.

‘Too many people to distinguish each face.’

Candles overhead emitted a provocative scent. Someone wielding a magic device to amplify their voice spun around the stage’s perimeter, stirring up the atmosphere.

Yudrain, indifferent to this, quickly scanned the surroundings. The spectator seats formed a semi-circle around the stage, and the highest section, shielded by partitions, seemed to be the ‘VIP section’ for nobles and the wealthy.

Here and there, members of the Nukijo gang, armed with knives, watched Yudrain with gleaming eyes.

Spotting a Nukijo laughing uproariously, Yudrain narrowed his eyes.

‘That position. I must remember it.’

Soon after, Jack emerged and stood before him. Perhaps due to the earlier conversation, the freckled boy’s face looked worried and pale. His eyes, filled with confusion and fear, revealed his inability to fathom Yudrain’s true nature and intentions.

‘Don’t worry. This won’t be your grave today.’

“Take off your clothes! Strip!”

Before the match began, jeers were directed at Yudrain's hooded figure. With a short breath, Yudrain tossed off his hood, revealing an outfit almost identical to Jack's, eliciting a burst of cheers.

'I never really wanted to wear these clothes… but had no choice.'

It would all be over soon, anyway.

As the bell signifying the start of the fight rang out, Yudrain slowly raised his hands above his head. Jack, startled, flinched noticeably.

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Chapter 671

As the bell signifying the start of the fight rang out, Yudrain slowly raised his hands above his head. Jack, startled, flinched noticeably.

A boy, whose ears sprouted like a dog's atop his head, hastily revealed his claws and teeth, readying himself to attack. However, Yuder paid him no mind. His gaze was fixed not on the boy, but on the sword in his hand, and its blunt sheath pointing towards the ceiling of the fighting arena.

The gamblers who had come to bet, unaware of the significance of this small gesture, excitedly shouted.

"Kill him! Finish him off!"

"Let the beast tear apart and ravage the second gender Awakener!"

"I've staked all my money on you! If you can't cough it up, you won't get off easy!"

The first to notice something amiss in Yudrain's actions was Nukijo.

"That guy, he's a fire user, right? I thought we had gotten rid of his sword. Who allowed him to use it?"

"Well, about that…"

"Wait a moment. That sword… It's the one I told you to sell off yesterday! That red gem!"

Nukijo was shocked to see Yuder holding the tacky, ostentatious sword they had confiscated and ordered to be sold. No matter how

much Nukijo rubbed his eyes and looked again, it was indeed the same weapon from yesterday.

Until a moment ago, Nukijo had been quite pleased with Yuder, who had thrown off his hood to reveal his face, transforming from a gloomy, unimpressive figure to a sword master straight out of an ancient painting, dressed in attire reminiscent of the classical Holy Fire style. This transformation was arresting, owing to his unexpectedly well-trained and sturdy physique, with an uncommonly straight posture and body lines. Even to Nukijo, accustomed to seeing all sorts of extraordinary beings, Yuder's physique seemed quite valuable.

People are naturally excited by the sight of a young, strapping body, especially one with hidden, scandalous secrets, soon to be covered in blood.

However, Nukijo was furious that such an unworthy sword would join in on today's historic first performance. It was not meant to be this way. He had envisioned a fiery first fight, a brutal clash between flames and beasts, culminating in the fiery side's defeat and a bloody spectacle of torn clothes and shattered limbs for the excited audience, not a clumsy sword fight.

"What use is a sword he can't even wield! Which idiot gave it back to him?"

The second gender Awakener's secrets, meant to be exposed in a bloody, heated battle, were supposed to be as thrilling and humiliating as possible. Nukijo had meticulously chosen the attire for this provocative performance, and the thought of it all going to waste in a dull sword fight made his blood boil.

"Did I give too much medicine to the second guest yesterday, preventing his flames?"

Even so, it didn’t explain how the sword had reappeared. Someone ought to have informed him…

“Who is it! Who brought him that damned sword? Hex and Bout, where are you now? They’re in charge of the third basement level today!”

“They haven’t returned yet. Maybe they’re still backstage?”

“Tell them to come here now!”

Nukijo’s subordinates, who had been standing by, hastily ran towards the backstage area. Unsatisfied, Nukijo gestured frantically to others around him.

“Tell him not to use that sword! If he resists, snatch it away by force!”

The bell that had been sounding the start of the competition suddenly ceased. As the announcer fell silent, Nukijo’s usually steadfast subordinates, unnerved by his agitated demeanor, began to murmur and show signs of discomfort. The atmosphere around them gradually deviated from its usual state. Jack, who had been hesitating about how to attack Yuder with his ears and claws extended, looked around in confusion.

“What’s happening? Why are they acting like that?”

“Isn’t it starting? Are we still waiting?”

Just at that moment, when the guests were murmuring their dissatisfaction at the unusual turn of events, Yuder turned his head and looked directly at Nukijo.

Then, he smiled distinctly, the corners of his lips curving upwards in undeniable mockery.

“!”

Nukijo was struck with such a shock that his head reeled.

“Is that bastard mocking me…?!”

As all eyes now focused on him, Nukijo’s disarray caused even his subordinates to lose their composure. This small breach was precisely what Yuder had been waiting for.

He gently swirled the sword he was holding, tracing a perfect arc as if from a textbook. The sheathed blade descended gracefully, then rose again, its tip once more aiming at the ceiling. Simultaneously, a spiral of flames climbed from the hilt, shooting explosively upwards along the sword’s body.

Of course, the flames could not surpass the height of an ordinary tree. They were suppressed by the translucent protective magic circle that had been activated around the stage.

The entire stage began to shake with a rumbling sound as the two forces collided. Usually, the power of Awakeners is confined to the inside of the stage. When power tries to extend beyond the stage or someone attempts to escape, protective magic circles are designed to stop it.

However, as Elpkins had initially informed them, the magic circle’s power could not withstand the strength of a sufficiently powerful Awakener.

And Yuder, naturally, was confident he could break the restraining power of the protective magic circle.

As he gripped the sword handle more firmly, the flames, twisted by the barrier, became more ferocious, thrashing as if trying to break through.

The spectacle was so astonishing that everyone was stunned. When finally the magic circle cracked and burst, spewing out a massive wave like blood, everyone could feel the impact. The obstructed power dissipated, and the liberated flames shot unrestrainedly even higher.

Screams of panic and alarm echoed as the gamblers cried out, “The protective magic has been broken!”

In the midst of the chaos, Nukijo hastily extended his hand to command his subordinates.

“Damn it, someone stop…!”

Boom!

At that moment, the flames finally burst through the ceiling of the auditorium.

Like a light arrow shot by the Sun God, the flames pierced through the ceiling and continued their relentless assault, floor by floor, like a cavalry charging without mercy.

Bang. Bang. Bang. The flames, having penetrated three levels, finally reached the real ceiling.

And then, with a deafening roar…

The flames broke through to the open sky.

A brilliant flame, shooting up from the underground as if to swallow the sky, spiraled around the sword. This awe-inspiring scene, reminiscent of the advent of a divine sword, was recreated by the second guest with his human form.

After witnessing such a tremendous spectacle, people find themselves unable to act.

Nukijo stared blankly at the man standing confidently, his sword entwined with flames.

‘Broken? The barrier that no one has breached since we reinforced it with a hefty sum… shattered by mere formless flames? And even the ceiling is pierced… Am I dreaming?’

This was a smaller version of the column of fire Yuder had used to break Nahan’s illusion in the East. Though its range was reduced and its size smaller, its power had become incomparably stronger, reflecting Yuder’s increased strength.

Yuder, confident that his flames could now be seen from not just around the Black Orca Tavern but anywhere in Charloin, withdrew his power.

Finally regaining his senses, Nukijo shouted, “Protect the guests! Capture him! Stop the match!”

“Understood!”

Nukijo’s subordinates, too stunned to move from witnessing the incredible scene, finally managed to stir their trembling limbs and dashed forward.

‘Where do you think you’re going?’

Yuder began to confront Nukijo’s subordinates climbing onto the stage. Armed and trying to look fierce, these back-alley thugs, who had never received proper training, were no match for him.

Every time Yuder swung his sheathed sword without even drawing it, those attempting to strike were sent flying or tumbling with screams. It was inexplicable how the sheath could repel the swords, but this was reality, not a dream.

Yuder struck one man on the head with his scabbard and kicked another charging at him, while with his other hand, he controlled the iron swords of his enemies, flailing them about.

“What, what is this! Why is my sword…!”

“Aaah!”

Those startled by their uncontrollable swords dropped them. Foolishly unarmed, they became easy prey for Yuder.

Having almost dealt with all those who had climbed onto the stage, Yuder was considering moving beyond the surrounding ring when he noticed Jack, pressed into a corner and clueless about what to do. Yuder tripped the last man rushing at him, punched him in the face, and then strode purposefully towards the frightened boy.

To Jack, Yuder’s approach seemed like a sentence of death.

“Who are you? I just came here to earn some money… Please don’t kill me.”

“If you have the mind to say that, then open your eyes wide and go back behind the stage to take care of your friends.”

Yuder, clicking his tongue, picked up a sword from one of Nukijo’s fallen subordinates and tossed it to the boy. Jack reflexively caught it.

“This place will be closed down after today. Look after yourself, and if you meet any members of the Cavalry on your way up, ask for protection.”

“Huh?”

“The imperial army or knights are fine too.”

“Huh?”

“If you pass the test and manage to enter the Cavalry, never think of setting foot in a place like this again. You probably won’t have the time, anyway.”

“Huh?”

“Go!”

Before Jack could ask anything more, he scurried away, like a startled puppy that had been prodded in the rear.

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Chapter 672

In the moments just before chaos erupted on the stage, a tall man with ordinary brown hair and a strangely blurred appearance was addressing the first arrivals, who had just come to participate that day.

“So, it seems everyone has come here for money, right?”

“Well… yes…”

This included young Awakeners, friends of Jack and members of the Star of Nagran, and a few Awakeners who had been tempted by the promise of paying off their debts. Their stories were diverse, but their ultimate goal was the same: money.

Despite their grave resolutions in coming here, they couldn’t hide their tension in the face of the unusual atmosphere they encountered on the day itself. However, the man before them, with his extraordinary eloquence, had quickly interjected himself into their midst, easing the mood. Before they knew it, they were spilling details about why they were here, their ages, and even where they were from.

A question arose in their minds: should they be engaging in such intimate conversation with someone they were supposed to fight? But the tall man made even these concerns feel trivial. In hindsight, they hadn’t even discussed anything particularly special.

“Then, what do you think is more important, life or money?”

The tall man’s manner of speaking was peculiar. Despite dressing in ancient-style clothes, no different from the others, and wearing only a shabby overcoat, his noble-like manner of speaking

seemed as if he had been using it all his life, making it impossible to guess his age or identity.

One of the participants who had come with Jack hesitantly spoke up.

“Obviously… it’s life.”

“And the others?”

“If I really had to choose, it would be life, but…”

“You have to be alive to make money, dont you?”

Everyone naturally responded that life was more important than money. The tall man nodded and smiled as if that was the answer he had hoped for.

“Ah. That’s a really good answer. It’s one of the most important things we should never forget in life.”

“But… why do you ask?”

“It’s simple.”

The man rose from where he had been comfortably leaning, speaking in a cheerful voice. The moment his gaze moved towards the stage, the various noises that had been reaching the waiting room began to fade away.

What’s happening? The first arrivals exchanged puzzled looks, while the man continued speaking calmly.

“Everyone here won’t be fighting today. This place is about to shut down.”

“What are you talking about…”

“Hex! Bout! Where are you? You guys!”

Just then, the door burst open as if it would break, and men with fierce looks rushed into the waiting room.

At the same time, the original participants who had been silently keeping their seats stood up all at once, following the tall man. Before the first arrivals could even react, the tall man effortlessly spun the worn-out sword he had been casually resting on his shoulder, seizing it with grace.

“What’s this? Where are Hex and Bout, and why are you guys here?”

“Wait… those guys arent supposed to be here!”

One of Nukijo’s henchmen, upon spotting Reneve and Elpkins in a corner, pointed at them. The atmosphere instantly turned cold. The henchmen all imagined their boss’s reaction upon learning of this situation, picturing his fury.

‘If he finds out they all escaped, we’re all dead!’

The most powerful among Nukijo’s henchmen yelled out loud.

“You fools… have you lost your minds? Daring to escape? You must be craving death! Who’s responsible? Who brought you here?”

“It was me,” declared the tall man, raising his hand.

“I freed them because they were pained and loathed being forced into combat. Is that a problem?”

“What…?”

“No one has the right to imprison free people here, you know.”

His smirk was infuriating, completely undermining the severity of the situation. Nukijo’s henchman, momentarily stunned, finally managed to shout.

“You know there’s no way out of here! Except for this madman, the rest of you can still turn back now and be spared! If you dont want to die, get back now! Especially you, woman! Dont you want to see your friend? Huh? Why cause trouble when you barely manage to obey? Do you really think you, a frail woman, can leave here alone?”

“…”

“Come over here now, while I’m still asking nicely!”

They naturally expected Reneve to comply.

However, Reneve didn’t move. Nukijo’s henchman, suspecting she might be deaf, reiterated, Dont you want to see your friend? It was a mere ploy to get her to obey, without even knowing who her friend was.

But Reneve, who had always been docile at the mention of friend, for the first time, stiffened and retorted.

“You’ve never shown me Cyril. Why should I return to a hellish place like this?”

“What?”

“Why should I?”

A deep-seated anger resonated in her vehement outcry, echoing through the waiting room.

Reneve, trembling with rage and her face flushed red, yelled.

“I have no reason to listen to you. I won’t heed the words of scum who kidnap people and force them to fight and die. Go ahead, kill me! I dont care if I die! Im leaving! I will leave!”

Nukijo’s henchman concluded that Reneve had completely lost her mind.

“That woman has gone mad. Fine. Just kill them all! Go tell the boss right now…!”

In that instant, a flash of light sliced through the waiting room.

Nukijo’s henchman didn’t even realize what had happened to him. As he turned to speak to the others, he was struck down.

“…Aaagh!”

The other henchmen screamed a beat too late. Amidst the chaos, the man with the unstained sword calmly sheathed it over his shoulder and addressed the Awakeners watching him.

“Now, I believe everyone understands why this place needs to shut down. Shall we try to escape now?”

Even those with the slightest sense knew that this was no ordinary fighting arena. The first arrivals, trembling and wordless, nodded their heads.

At that moment, a thunderous sound and impact, as if something on the stage had shattered, shook the waiting room.

“Ugh!”

“What, what’s that?”

While Nukijo’s henchmen panicked, the tall man gazed towards the stage with a slightly different look. It was a tender and caring

gaze, filled with concern and trust, yet fleeting. He then returned to his composed and confident demeanor.

“Now, Elpkins. Lead the way. Its your turn. Leave the rest to us.”

“I understand!”

In the midst of a tremendous vibration that shook the entire building, Elpkins let out a powerful scream and, flapping his wings, rushed towards the stage.

“Where do you think you’re going? Capture that man!”

Nukijo’s remaining henchmen shouted as they grabbed their weapons.

Despite seeing one of their own already fallen, they were not overly frightened. In their perception, the Awakeners were always powerless, bumbling weaklings, inept in using their strength and helpless before debts and money.

The person who fell had fallen to the sword, so they thought that as long as they were cautious of that madman, everything would be fine. But they were wrong.

Familiar perceptions create traps.

Rushing in without considering that this was no longer the third basement floor, and that threats and coercion no longer affected the Awakeners, they soon paid a painfully high price for their oversight.

“Who says they’re capturing who?”

“You will never leave.”

Quiet until now, the Awakeners erupted in fury, charging in. The swords wielded by Nukijo’s gang were no threat to the physically superior Awakeners.

The Awakeners, screaming in rage, freely vented their frustrations on Nukijo's gang. Their cries of anger echoed in the lounge for a long time.

Victory, of course, belonged to them.

Elpkins, leaving the other Awakeners behind and rushing forward energetically, passed by Jack, who was heading towards the lounge, and soon arrived on the stage.

Whenever he stood there, he always wished he could rather die. Pain and the smell of blood were all he remembered from the fighting ring.

But now, it was different.

In this place where everything he remembered had crumbled, Yuder, standing proudly with a sword in hand and his fist and face stained with the blood of others, turned towards him.

"You've arrived."

A single emotionless sentence, yet hearing it strangely made him feel like crying.

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Chapter 673

“You’ve arrived.”

A single emotionless sentence, yet hearing it strangely made him feel like crying.

Amidst the overwhelming surge of emotions, Elpkins struggled to contain himself. Around him, chaos reigned supreme. Yuder scanned the scene quickly the coarse shouting of Nukijo, the murderous intents charging from all sides, and the frantic movements of the VIPs attempting escape before leaping down from the stage.

“Elpkins. Begin as soon as you’re ready.”

Yuder wore no armor that could provide significant protection, but he didn’t consider this a major hindrance. After all, being armored didn’t necessarily guarantee an advantage over an unarmored opponent.

Upon landing below the stage, Yuder effortlessly parried the onslaught of attacks using the forces of nature, his sword, and his entire body. Despite facing numerous opponents, he was not only unyielding but occasionally overpowered those who dared approach him. Elpkins watched, reminded of a predator leaping amidst herbivores.

Yuder quickly froze and then melted the spilled alcohol, causing Nukijo’s henchmen to slip and collide with each other. Without even looking, he sent a would-be attacker flying with a single back kick. Attempts to ensnare him were futile, whether it was breaking iron weapons with a flick of his hand or catching and accurately returning thrown daggers to their throwers.

Among them were those who resorted to despicable tactics, like scattering sharp shards of broken glass or blindly lunging to grab ankles or hair, aiming for the eyes. Yuder remained undaunted by such attacks, simply exacting a devilish retribution twice as fierce.

Several thrown daggers aimed at Yuder in mid-air suddenly changed direction, striking Nukijo's other henchmen instead. Elpkins almost laughed, witnessing them scurrying under tables in terror. He had never imagined he'd live to see such a spectacle it was truly magnificent.

But he had his own role to play, a task only Elpkins could undertake, as mentioned by Yuder the day before.

Yuder had asked, "Can you fly tomorrow?"

"Excuse me?"

"I mean, at the moment the signal drops, can you soar to the sky without looking back?"

Elpkins possessed a massive pair of wings. These wings were severely damaged, once broken at the joints due to Nukijo's gang's antics, and further twisted and cracked through numerous battles, rendering them grotesque.

Although possessing regenerative abilities, the extent of damage had once led him to fear he might never fly again. Kishiar had miraculously healed them to almost perfect condition, yet healing the bones and regrowing the feathers didn't guarantee immediate flight.

Elpkins had truly flown only once since he had grown his wings a moment of awakening as he fell from a cliff. In that instance, he had been too distraught to realize he had grown wings or that he had flown desperately back to the ground. Since his awakening, the fear in people's eyes had kept him from using his wings at all.

But now, to rise swiftly into the sky at the signal was that really possible?

Elpkins tentatively flexed his wings, feeling a throbbing pain due to their recent healing, and a suppressed groan escaped his lips. But still

“I can do it. I’ll try whatever it takes.”

The direction in which to fly was inconsequential. If his benefactors wished it, Elpkins was determined to succeed.

“Yes. If it goes as you’ve instructed, one of us will be in tomorrow’s first match. The moment the fight starts, we’ll immediately stop everything and create a straight passage from underground to the outside. And you…”

With eyes as dark as the abyss, Yuder continued.

“You are the one who can use that passage faster than anyone else here.”

That was why this task was meant for Elpkins alone.

Upon hearing Yuder’s explanation, a shiver ran down Elpkins’ spine.

No one had ever acknowledged his wings as useful. But now, it was different.

After being trapped on the third underground level, Elpkins spent a comfortable night for the first time, practicing moving his wings throughout. Initially, they barely twitched as if the bones had solidified. Even by this morning, there wasn’t much improvement, but persistent effort gradually elicited a response. When he exerted strength, his wings flapped noticeably differently than before.

Elpkins took a deep breath and looked up at the hole Yuder had opened in the ceiling. It was just large enough for one person to pass through.

I can fly. I must!

As his wings fluttered more vigorously, like birds practicing flight, Yuder defended the stage, ensuring no one could approach Elpkins.

In battles where one faces many, the lone fighter is typically at a disadvantage, but Yuder’s situation was somewhat different.

His fists struck vital points with precision. His swordplay effortlessly deflected weapons wielded by much larger opponents before slicing tendons in an instant, rendering them powerless. With the elements of fire, water, wind, and earth, his movements were a flash here, a flicker there, upending his enemies’ tactics in the blink of an eye.

Yuder moved with the freedom and ferocity of a fish in water, using his entire body as a weapon. If there were ever a person born to fight, using every part of his body as a weapon, it was him. His movements were so predictive of enemy attacks, it was hard to believe he wasn’t actually forewarned.

Was he born for combat?

Everyone thought so, observing his perfect, restrained movements, never wasting a moment, never superfluous.

This was entirely different from the knights who performed their pretty, demure swordplay. This monster was too accustomed to this ruleless melee. The cruelty with which he wielded an unconscious man’s body as a shield against incoming attacks made even Nukijo cringe. This was a being closer to a demon than a paragon of justice.

Absolute strength. An existence like a natural disaster, without hesitation or mercy.

Though many of Nukijo’s men still remained, they began to fear Yuder.

No matter how numerous the herbivores, they cannot overcome a single predator. This black-haired monster was a born predator, and they were mere prey, a realization that struck them to the bone. Once they acknowledged they could not overcome him, fear and anxiety spread through the group in an instant.

“Damn it! Don’t back down! How can we not take down that one man! Not even a scratch on him, how is that possible!”

Nukijo, seeing his men falter and lose spirit, screamed in frustration.

“Hold on! Kill him by any means! Anyone who retreats will die by my hand!”

“With the roof blown open, it must be noisy outside by now. I hope those on the other side are keeping the intruders at bay.”

Yet, as if sensing Nukijo’s thoughts, Yuder, who had been fighting fiercely, shouted.

“Elpkins! Is it not ready yet?”

“No, it is done now!”

Done? What was done?

Preoccupied with Yuder, Nukijo had only just realized Elpkins’ presence.

“Why is he here? Wasn’t he scouring for us till yesterday?”

Gone were the terrible wounds. Elpkins' body was now as clean and healthy as the day he first stepped foot here. A pair of giant wings, densely feathered, stretched from his back like unfolding arms. As everyone momentarily lost their gaze in awe,

"Uaaaah!"

Elpkins finally kicked the ground and soared, wings flapping vigorously.

As he ascended shakily toward his target, Nukijo quickly realized where he was headed. He was flying towards the hole in the ceiling.

"Shoot him, shoot!"

As Nukijo yelled, his men, who had been busily firing crossbows at Yuder, panicked, not knowing what to do.

"We've used all the arrows on that one…!"

"What? Already?!"

In Nukijo's astonishment, Elpkins soared powerfully. The more he flapped, the more stable his movements became.

"I've found one!"

"Shoot quickly!"

As one of Nukijo's men found a remaining crossbow bolt from afar and aimed, Elpkins did not stop. Just as he reached the hole Yuder had made, the loaded arrow was fired.

Elpkins braced for pain but did not alter his course or relax his wings.

"Aaaah!"

But the pain did not come. The scream came from elsewhere. As he passed through the ceiling hole, Elpkins saw the arrow, redirected, pierce Nukijo. The feat was clearly Yuder's, with the power of the wind in his hand.

"Go up!"

As their eyes met, Yuder mouthed the command.

Elpkins responded, never looking back, only upwards, as he powerfully flapped his wings. Pieces of the broken ceiling and floor grazed him, leaving wounds, but he paid them no heed.

For the first time since being trapped underground, the sky was suddenly close, then filled his view.

Elpkins was now atop the Black Orca Tavern's roof.

"What is that?"

"My goodness. A man with wings!"

As people below pointed and gaped in shock, Elpkins gasped for air. His wing joints ached as if they would break, but he felt no pain.

He inhaled the cold, sweet air outside deeply and then shouted,

"I am an Awakener! I've just escaped from an illegal fighting ring below! Please help!"

This was the line Kishiar and Yuder had instructed him to shout as soon as he emerged.

At last, everything was accomplished.

Shivering with the tremendous sensation of having accomplished what he once deemed might be impossible, his own mission, Elpkins shed tears.

It was, at last, an escape.

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Chapter 674

Those loyal to Nukijo were not only present in the Black Orca Tavern but existed everywhere in Charloin.

On days when the Awakener fighter betting matches, which Nukijo had been particularly attentive to lately, were held, his subordinates would temporarily cease their usual activities. They would linger around the Black Orca, vigilantly keeping watch to ensure the safety of the patrons and prepare for any unforeseen incidents.

Nukijo, intuitively certain that the success of today's fight would significantly impact his future business expansion, had instructed his men to prepare more rigorously than usual.

"Did I hear that an unprecedented number of VIPs have come today? Incredible. Are the fights of the Awakeners that entertaining? I wish I could go down and watch for myself."

"If you want to do that, first do this job properly. Don't you know that people like us, who have nothing, need to show our faces consistently for months before getting a chance to work inside? It's truly ruthless."

"Damn it. It's cold out, and I wish I could go in and have some Parka beer."

"You fool. If you see someone passing by with a bottle, just hit them and take it as tribute. Then we can drink here too."

"Oh, is that so?"

The South was much warmer than the northern regions, but that didn't mean winter was non-existent. Grumbling about the chilly

weather and making crude jokes, two of Nukijo's subordinates suddenly felt a strange rumbling beneath their feet.

"Huh? Is my stomach rumbling because I'm hungry? It feels like the ground is shaking."

"No, I felt it too."

"What's going on?"

In that moment, the roof of the Black Orca Tavern exploded with a loud bang, and fiery red flames shot up into the air.

"Aaaahhh!"

Screams erupted from all around. Nukijo's men instinctively covered their heads and dropped to the ground. The flames, scattering debris and illuminating the night sky like day, eventually subsided, but the shock remained.

"What in the world…!"

"What's happened?"

Fortunately, the Black Orca Tavern was not in operation today. The main fighting arena on the first floor had been closed in rotation to focus on the Awakener fighter match in the basement. The surrounding taverns under Nukijo's influence had also closed early, sensing the need for caution.

However, the flames soared so high they were visible from anywhere in Charloin. People who felt the massive shock and saw the red glow filling the sky started to emerge, thinking there was a fire.

"What's happened at the fighting arena? What should we do?"

“First, stop anyone from entering the tavern! Don’t you know why the boss left us here? It’s to keep the door shut and prevent unnecessary people from entering in situations like this! Even if everyone knows what we do here, there are still things that must not be revealed, you fools! Get a grip!”

A long-time right-hand man of Nukijo shouted orders as he moved around. Following his command, Nukijo’s subordinates hastily surrounded the Black Orca, preventing others from approaching.

It was a wise decision. As soon as they secured the tavern, others began to appear.

“What? You say there wasn’t a fire? Really?”

“Yes, I’m telling you! Look, there’s a hole, but no fire!”

“Well, that’s true.”

“Ah, you all know what we’re doing here. It was just a minor accident, but it will be sorted out soon.”

The first to appear, unsurprisingly, were members of the public safety patrol, who had been on duty nearby. Most of them were already acquainted with Nukijo’s gang and had a rough idea of what was going on under the tavern. Accustomed to turning a blind eye to criminal activities in exchange for bribes, the patrol members clicked their tongues upon seeing the giant hole in the roof of the tavern but didn’t force their way in.

“Tsk. Even so, this is a first, isn’t it? A hole in the roof? I wish they’d keep it down. There are limits to how much we and the Lord can overlook.”

“I know, I know. We’ll sort this out quickly and clean it up. When have we ever let you down? Let’s not make a big deal of it since we

all know what's going on. If you overlook this just this once, our boss won't forget to return the favor!"

As Nukijo's men made a money-gesturing sign, the patrol soldiers' expressions softened.

"Ahem. Alright. Clean this up quickly, then, and we'll be on our way."

The hole in the roof was quite something, but since the area was mostly empty and it seemed no one was hurt and quiet below, why stir things up?

No one here wanted to do more than necessary.

Just one blind eye, and Nukijo would, as always, show the utmost sincerity.

The patrolmen coughed and smiled, even extending the kindness of waving off the crowd that had gathered with Nukijo's gang.

"There's nothing to see here, everyone can go! No one's hurt, and they'll have it sorted soon! The show's over, alright?"

Amid the tense atmosphere, as people, intimidated by the menacing figures, began to disperse, a particularly tall man bumped into the hand of one of Nukijo's gang members.

"What's with you? Didn't you hear me tell you to leave?"

"…"

The man met their gaze silently. He had the distinct features of a Southerner, with a sword at his waist. His strong and cold eyes briefly intimidated Nukijo's subordinate, who then straightened up and pushed him again, feigning toughness.

“What? A rotten tomato, huh? Don’t you understand the Imperial language? Eh? Get out of here.”

‘Rotten tomato’ was a derogatory Southern term, mocking the reddish hue of the Southerners’ skin.

The Southerner, having been subjected to such a blatantly offensive insult, finally showed a bit of a reaction.

“Over here.”

However, his response was not directed at Nukijo’s gang. Instead, he calmly raised a hand towards something behind them. Immediately, the presence of many others was felt from behind.

‘What? They don’t seem like ordinary people… When did so many gather here?’

An eerie and wild aura surrounded them, impossible to notice how and when they had come so close. The atmosphere tensed rapidly as dozens of these imposing figures, radiating such a presence, gathered around the tall Southerner.

“You’re here. I saw the signal just now. How are things?”

“As you see.”

The Southerner responded curtly, and the unidentified figures nodded gravely. Nukijo’s men could not fathom what these people, diverse in gender, age, and size, and seemingly unrelated, were doing converging here.

“Who are you people? Where did you come from?”

Faced with these unfamiliar faces, one of Nukijo’s men, his face marred with scar marks and particularly fierce-looking, shouted. Usually, his roar would intimidate anyone, but not this time.

Excluding the peculiar group before them, everyone else had seemed ordinary.

Unflinchingly, they endured his shouts. Some even smirked, as if they found it hardly amusing.

'…Smirking?'

Then, one man, whose appearance was reminiscent of a bear, pulled out a shining silver button from his pocket and spoke.

"We are the Cavalry. I've come here after hearing about the presence of Awakeners. Move aside, we need to check inside."

"The Cavalry?"

It was common knowledge that the Cavalry had come to establish a southern branch, but no one really knew who they were.

Only then did Nukijo's gang realize that the shared trait among this odd, disparate group was that they were all 'Awakeners.'

'Damn it. Troublesome lot. Why now?'

Naturally, Nukijo's men had no intention of letting them in. They were determined to guard this place until they received permission from Nukijo himself.

"So what if you're the Cavalry? This is our land, our establishment. We don't just let anyone in because they want to enter! Even the proud Charloin guards here have agreed it's fine. Who are you to barge in?"

As always, they employed a strategy based on law, rights, and shamelessness. This was their homeland, their land. The guards, knights, officials, and numerous VIPs they had colluded with over

time had taught them that they had the ‘right’ to refuse visitors without a legitimate reason.

The Charloin guards, catching the imploring gaze of Nukijo’s gang, intervened with annoyance.

“Are you really the Cavalry?”

“Indeed.”

“Why don’t you just leave? This is Charloin. Matters in Charloin are dealt with by Charloin’s people. You have no right to interfere here.”

“You heard him. Now, scram!”

But the Cavalry were not ordinary either. The man, who had been standing firm and silent, responded indifferently to the hostility thrown at him.

“That’s true. However, His Imperial Majesty has stated that incidents involving Awakeners are to be prioritized by the Cavalry. So, we can enter.”

“That fire just now wasn’t caused by an Awakener!”

Despite the shouts and threats, the Cavalry member repeated the same words, seemingly impervious to any intimidation.

They were impossible to communicate with. Nukijo’s men exchanged glances and muttered curses among themselves. It was Nukijo’s men who finally snapped.

“If you won’t leave nicely, then we have no choice!”

Just as they were about to resort to violence against the Cavalry, something happened.

“What’s that?”

A cry from the onlookers, who had been watching from a distance, coincided with something soaring up through the broken roof.

“Good heavens! A man with wings!”

It sounded absurd, but it was true. There, hovering high in the sky, was a man with giant wings on his back and antlers like a deer’s, gasping for breath.

Amidst the crowd’s astonishment, the man inhaled deeply and then shouted loudly.

“I am an Awakener! I’ve just escaped from an illegal fighting ring below! Please help!”

After his desperate cry echoed, the bear-like Cavalry member slowly smiled and spoke.

“…Now we can go in, right?”

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Chapter 675

Several days ago, Kishiar La Orr had accurately anticipated this entire situation during a conversation with Yuder.

“Charloin has a distinctive character, blending the exclusive temperament of the South, forged through prolonged battles with the Southern tribes, and the mercantile spirit developed through long-standing trade with foreigners. It’s a peculiar mix of both attributes.”

In Charloin, there was a pervasive attitude that anything goes for the sake of making money. At the same time, there was a staunch loyalty among those who considered themselves allies and a marked disdain for outside interference. This was the prevailing demeanor among Charloin’s lord and others.

“They know the people involved in illegal betting rings and drugs are at fault, but they won’t let us intervene unless there’s an undeniable justification. They see these issues as internal matters, as long as the perpetrators are among them.”

“Yes, I have encountered them in the ‘previous game.’”

Yuder, too, had much to say about the frustrating attitudes of the Southern people. In his previous life, even in the most remote rural areas of the South, where the Cavalry’s branch was tucked away, they refused to open their doors to external organizations, insisting that issues like gambling and drug rampant should be dealt with internally.

It was only after the drug-related incidents grew so severe that they caught the attention of Emperor Katchian that their stubbornness was finally broken.

Yuder didn’t mention all the irritating incidents from that time. A mere mention from him that he had dealt with them before was enough for Kishiar La Orr to understand the whole situation.

Understanding Yuder’s feelings, the man smiled softly and continued, “Forcing our way in and then cleaning up afterward is one option, but it would make it extremely difficult for the Cavalry’s southern branch to operate properly afterward. That’s why I think it’s better to prepare in advance.”

“Prepare in advance?”

“Create a situation that gives us a legitimate reason to act.”

This approach of creating a pretext might seem slow and pointless at first. After all, isn’t it true that words are distant and fists are close?

However, Kishiar understood the necessity and effectiveness of this seemingly slow and pointless act. “Throughout history, a single small pretext has led to the death of many and the salvation of others. It’s likely that they’ll use long-standing customs and rights as their pretext to obstruct us. So, we’ll do the same, creating an irrefutable pretext based on our own rights. A perfect pretext will serve as both our sword and shield.”

Indeed, Kishiar La Orr’s judgment was correct once again.

In Charloin, it was customary to handle matters internally, and those who claimed their right to deny outsiders access to their tavern and land were silenced by the proclamation of Elpkins.

Elpkins’ declaration provided the Cavalry with the perfect pretext to act. As an Awakener acting on the Emperor’s orders, he had priority over any other organization, and he made this clear in his own words. Once he mentioned what lay beneath, no one could obstruct their path.

As the guards of Charloin's security force were rendered speechless, the leader of the Cavalry's Southern branch, Kurga, declared powerfully, "An Awakener has requested assistance, so from now on, this is our responsibility! Let's bring down the Awakener to help, and the rest will proceed downstairs! If anyone tries to stop us, it's considered defying the orders of His Majesty the Emperor and our Commander, and we can push through!"

"Good!"

"Sir Zuckerman and all members of the Southern Army's Awakener Brigade, please join us!"

"Understood!"

The soldiers of the Southern Army's Awakener Brigade, including Sunz, shouted with vigor. Nathan Zuckerman also quietly drew his sword, standing by their side.

"Awakener Brigade… what? What are those people saying now?"

"Damn it. Just block them! Don't let them through, no matter what!"

Amidst the shouts of frustration, Nukijo's subordinates, casting aside any concerns for their dignity, drew their weapons. Even as they charged ferociously, the members of the Cavalry's legion remained undisturbed, calmly readying themselves for battle.

The two groups clashed amidst the astonished screams of onlookers watching from afar.

Shortly after, everyone present witnessed a fight with such an overwhelming disparity that it was hard to believe even with their own eyes.

“Alright. Please come down this way. Relax your wings, it’s time to fold them in. Good. The rescue is complete.”

Elpkins, who had climbed up to the half-collapsed roof to help, was slowly lowered to the ground, guided by the hands of the Cavalry who had used their abilities to assist him. Upon touching the ground, a numbing pain coursed through his wings, as if they had been waiting for this moment. However, the excitement still pounding in his heart prevented him from feeling it as pain.

The scene around him was chaotic, no different from what he had seen underground. The Cavalry swiftly subdued Nukijo’s men who had tried to block them, leaving only a few to guard the area as the rest descended below. Those few managed the situation and dealt with Nukijo’s other subordinates who arrived late. Despite being outnumbered, their overwhelming skill meant they were hardly threatened.

“Ugh!”

Amidst the screams of Nukijo’s gang, flung about by the Cavalry’s attacks, those who had rescued Elpkins passed through the corridor, treating his wounds and speaking with smiling faces.

“When the Commander and Yuder said they’d send someone recognizable as a signal, I couldn’t quite picture it. But I never expected to meet someone giving such a clear signal. Your wings still seem to be hurting, are you alright?”

“I’m fine. What about the others…?”

“They’ve all gone down; it will all be over soon. You’ve done your part, so don’t worry about what comes next.”

Elpkins had long realized that his appearance stood out even among other Awakeners. Yet, the Cavalry didn’t seem the least bit intimidated by him, reminiscent of when he first met Yuder.

‘Well, that makes sense. We’re all part of the same Cavalry, right?

Technically, it was more about the influence Yuder had on the Cavalry. However, Elpkins was still unaware of this and simply thought as much. Overwhelmed by the emotion of feeling ordinary for the first time since his awakening, his throat tightened with emotion, but he managed to voice his concerns.

“Do you think… I’ve been of help to everyone? Will the others be rescued soon and come up too?”

As Elpkins asked tentatively, his face flushed with excitement, the Cavalry grinned and patted his shoulder.

“Of course. Who do you think is down there? There’s no need to worry at all. It’s hard even for trained people to act according to instructions in a sudden situation, but you managed to do it all in one go. You should be proud of yourself. Oh, by the way, didn’t Yuder ask you to join the Cavalry?”

“Indeed, he had. But…”

“Oh, I knew it.”

The Cavalry, faces alight with excitement, exchanged a few words among themselves before turning their gaze to Elpkins. Unlike the cold, evaluating stares he was accustomed to in the fighting pits, these looks were more akin to those of friendly neighbors, welcoming a new member into their midst.

“Hmm. Since we have some time before the others return, how about you listen to an explanation and write an application?”

“But… I can’t read or write.”

“That’s alright. None of us knew anything about reading or writing before we joined the Cavalry. We learned everything after joining. We’ll help you with the application form; you just have to answer the questions. You’re going to apply, aren’t you?”

Despite telling himself it was time to stop crying, Elpkins once again wiped the tears welling in his eyes and nodded emphatically.

“Yes. I want to apply…”

In the background, the shouts and curses of Nukijo’s gang, fleeing from another attack of the Cavalry, filled the air. The Charloin security guards, who had once tried to protect them, had long since fled in panic.

The people of Charloin, who had almost been forced to return by Nukijo’s gang, were now eagerly taking their places to watch the spectacle.

“Wow. Never thought I’d live to see the day Nukijo’s gang gets what they deserve.”

“Is this even allowed?”

“They defied the Emperor’s order. Even the security guards couldn’t say anything and just left.”

“Serves them right. I knew something like this would happen eventually. Remember when that person lost their son here and got arrested for speaking out? They never got punished then, but now, they’re finally facing divine retribution.”

“Those people are part of the Cavalry, right?”

For the first time, those who had previously considered even mentioning the Cavalry’s Southern branch a taboo began to openly discuss it.

This was the sound of the Cavalry gaining a legitimate standing for their future activities in the South, and at the same time, a signal of the success of their plan.

“These bastards. Where do you think you’re going…! Ugh!”

A few of Nukijo’s men, who had been hiding in a broken passage and were about to charge out energetically, were sent flying against a wall by a single punch from Kurga, knocking them unconscious.

“Thank you. Knowing in advance where they were hiding made it easier for us.”

“Ah, no problem. Glad to have been of help.”

Sunz, who had informed the Cavalry of the hidden foes’ location, scratched his head with a smile. They continued their journey towards the underground fighting pits.

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Chapter 676

Yuder’s straight drilling from the underground left the path downwards in disarray, with many parts shattered and collapsed.

In the darkness, devoid of even a lantern, the situation of treading an unfamiliar path was hardly favorable for the Cavalry. However, their rigorous training and abilities, ingrained in their bones, allowed them to swiftly overcome these obstacles, significantly aided by the cooperative efforts of the Southern Armys Awakener Brigade.

The most invaluable assistance came from Sunz, a vision ability user. Initially, when Yuder first encountered him, his ability was merely to see something that was obstructed. Now, it had evolved to discern the layout of paths enveloped in impenetrable darkness and even count and locate hidden enemies.

Leading the way, Sunz surveyed the surroundings, discerning and pointing out the presence and location of hidden foes, enabling the others to prepare preemptive responses. The ability to react first, regardless of where the enemy appeared, was incredibly advantageous.

Emon, standing beside Sunz, also drew attention. His rapid, precise bursts of flame, like sparks from a flint, were remarkably efficient in combat.

Although the Cavalry members, with their longer training and varied experiences, were more seasoned as a group, the individual prowess of the Awakener Brigade was equally formidable.

Intrigued by the reputed skills of the Awakener-only special force, the Cavalry members couldn’t help but admire the Awakener Brigade’s prowess.

Similarly, the Awakener Brigade members were continually astonished by the capabilities of the Cavalry, only previously known through hearsay.

They wondered how the Cavalry could so efficiently engage in combat without verbal communication, perfectly discerning friend from foe, as if they had trained intensely to respond in any situation with their eyes closed.

Considering the Awakener Brigade's recent formation, the Cavalry members initially thought that they would be worse than them. Seeing how amazing the Awakener Brigade actually was, the realization dawned on the Cavalry members that complacency could lead to intensified training if Yuder noticed them falling behind.

As they advanced swiftly, keeping an eye on each other's capabilities, Nathan Zuckerman, arguably the most powerful among them, silently followed.

Kishiar allowed Nathan Zuckerman to use his strength only when the Cavalry's power alone seemed insufficient against formidable enemies. Otherwise, his role as the adjutant was to observe and act as Kishiar's eyes and ears in his absence. To an onlooker, it appeared as though he was being protected, but in reality, the opposite was true.

"Hmm?"

Leading the way, Sunz suddenly halted, tilting his head as if sensing something amiss, and squinted into the distance. Emon inquired:

"What's wrong? Is someone hiding ahead?"

"No… Not ahead. But…"

His eyes, veiled in a faint mist, scanned the darkness beyond human sight.

“It seems someone is approaching from beyond the wall.”

“Beyond the wall?”

“A secret passage, perhaps.”

Kurga muttered to himself. Continuously scanning the wall, Sunz slowly nodded.

“Yes, that’s right. It seems to be a secret passage. Several layers of walls inside this one made it hard for even my power to detect at first. Now that I can see the figure, I understand.”

Sunz approached the wall and, without hesitation, closed his eyes to concentrate. His hands trembled slightly, and sweat formed on his brow. He revealed crucial information: to enter the passage, they had to breach a very thick wall, and those using the passage to approach their location would still need some time to arrive.

“There are quite a few escaping through the passage, at least 20, I’d say. Their slow and disorganized movements suggest they’re untrained. There are guides leading them at the front.”

That was all Sunz could discern. Exhausted, he withdrew, gasping for breath. The Cavalry members discussed how to deal with those ascending through the secret passage.

“It’s obvious who they are bringing up through the secret passage in such a situation. They must be the ones the Commander told us to capture, right?”

“Breaking through the wall is easy, but who will do it?”

“Me. I’ll do it!”

“Your power causes too much aftermath. Do we need to collapse the entire building just to break a wall? This is my specialty.”

After a brief discussion, one of the Cavalry members approached the wall. Astonishingly, as he tapped a few spots on the wall, the stones at the touched points vanished as if they never existed and reappeared behind him, clattering to the ground.

The Awakener Brigade members couldn’t hide their amazement at the effortless creation of a human-sized hole without any shock. Kurga briefly explained:

“He has the ability to relocate objects he touches. Initially, he could only move a leaf from front to back, but now his skill has improved significantly. He can even dislocate limbs to unnatural positions with that power. It’s quite painful, I must say.”

The unnecessary addition to the explanation made them wince, imagining the pain.

‘It sounds like he’s experienced it firsthand. Do they really train so ruthlessly, attacking each other like that?’

‘That’s chilling… The Cavalry really is relentless.’

“It’s done! Let’s go!”

The Cavalry member who had made the hole cheerfully announced. Pushing aside their thoughts, they promptly entered the passage.

They soon encountered the escapees in the passage that Sunz had foreseen.

“Who are you!”

The subordinates of Nukijo, escorting the VIPs, shouted in alarm.

The VIPs, being carried up by their servants with strained faces, were startled. The Cavalry members greeted them with smiles.

“Ah, you look like distinguished people, but to take a stroll in such a place. It seems the trend for walking paths has shifted to dust-filled secret passages.”

They were no longer the people who once feared the nobility and remained silent. Hearing their mocking tone, Nukijo’s subordinates couldn’t hide their confusion and shouted again.

“Who are you!”

“We are the Cavalry. We received a report of an illegal gambling ring involving Awakeners here, and we’ve come for a rescue.”

Their faces changed dramatically upon hearing Kurga’s calm reply. One of Nukijo’s subordinates bit his lip and turned his head.

“Protect the VIPs! Make an escape route!”

“That won’t be possible.”

In the narrow passage, Nukijo’s subordinates and the Cavalry clashed. Although the Cavalry members anticipated an easy victory, this time, there was an unexpected variable they hadn’t foreseen.

The unforeseen variable emerged when Sunz, who had overexerted his powers, gasped for breath at the back and suddenly appeared before everyone, shouting a warning.

“Emon! Watch out behind!”

“What?”

Reacting to his friend’s shout, Emon instinctively turned around. Immediately, his shoulder and chest were sliced as if attacked by

something sharp. Fortunately, the sturdy leather vest he wore protected his chest, but his arm inevitably bled.

“There was nothing there before… What is this…!”

“Fall back! To the right!”

Following Sunz’s cry, a Cavalry member to Emon’s right yelped in pain from a stabbing attack. In the blink of an eye, several others were also wounded by these sudden, seemingly airborne attacks in the cramped and dark space. The short duration of these unexpected assaults resulted in considerable damage.

“Damn it!”

“What the hell is this?”

Sunz’s eyes glowed bright blue, veiled in a mist-like energy. He quickly identified the nature of this mysterious assault.

“There’s someone else here who can use abilities! You can’t see them, but I can! However, they’re too fast… Argh!”

He abruptly rolled to dodge an incoming attack, narrowly escaping harm. Others quickly surrounded and protected Sunz.

“Are you alright?”

“Yes, yes! Thank you. Anyway, it’s certain there’s another Awakener here! They can attack even while hidden, so everyone be careful!”

Tension surfaced on the faces of the Cavalry members. However, none showed any signs of retreat or fear. Kurga quickly assessed the situation and spoke.

“Our first priority is to prevent them from escaping. Captain Sunz and the Awakener Brigade will cover our rear and block the path,

informing us of the enemy’s location. We’ll handle the rest.”

The Awakener Brigade members were significantly injured due to the unexpected attacks. In contrast, the Cavalry members, thanks to their deep-rooted training, were almost unscathed.

Everyone deeply felt the true value of their arduous training in such a situation and swiftly moved to positions as per Kurga’s orders. Tension filled the passage, alert to the invisible attacks that could come at any moment.

Once again, Sunz, sensing something, looked up and shouted.

“Someone else is coming from that direction!”

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Chapter 677

Once again, Sunz, sensing something, looked up and shouted.

“Someone else is coming from that direction!”

The already tense atmosphere shifted once more at his cry. The faces of the Cavalry members and the Awakener Brigade members lost their composure, showing distinct rigidity, while on the other hand, the faces of the guests and Nukijo’s gang, who were just waiting for an opportunity to escape, lit up with relief and hope.

Whoever was coming, only a few people on Nukijo’s side knew and could use this secret passage.

‘Has the boss sent additional personnel to protect us? That’s fortunate.’

‘Maybe the boss himself is coming here. Since the building is in such disrepair, we’ll have to escape as soon as the situation settles…’

‘If Nukijo comes, we’ll find a way to break through these guys. No matter how strong, one can’t take on a thousand.’

Nukijo’s men, their spirits visibly lifted, didn’t miss this opportunity, nor did the stealth Awakener among them. Suns, noticing the silent onslaught about to start again, struggled to open his mouth and yell.

“They’re coming again! Crouch down and defend your lower body!”

It was a difficult task for many to move haphazardly to avoid the attack of one who was hidden. The Cavalry members cursed and grumbled aloud, dodging the attacks with great difficulty based on

their instincts. The pressure of potentially attacking a comrade if they made a wrong move was immense.

“This is maddening. I need to see something to fight it.”

“Dammit. I wish I could burn them all like Yuder!”

Suns and Emon both thought the Cavalry members were truly remarkable as they managed to avoid fatal injuries while screaming, yet dodging quite skillfully.

‘In fact, that they can curse while avoiding unseen attacks means they have some leeway… To be able to do this much just on instinct without the ability to see through things, how much effort must they have put in their training.’

In truth, it was just a habit developed by the Cavalry members accustomed to extreme training. But they did not realize this.

The most emphasized thing in the hellish training of the Cavalry was one thing.

‘Increase the chance of survival in any situation.’

Combat does not choose the situation. How nice it would be to always fight in favorable circumstances, but situations like now, where they can’t use any of their abilities, are bound to occur.

Therefore, Yuder trained his members mercilessly under various hypothetical situations. Throwing a fire user into water, making someone who needs a weapon fight empty-handed were just a part of it.

Thanks to those times, the members could hold on in this deadlock situation where no solution seemed visible. They were surprised themselves that their bodies moved before they could

think, avoiding attacks by just the slight change in air flow caused by the movement of the hidden assailant.

‘This is crazy. I can’t believe I’m dodging this.’

‘I don’t know what’s happening, but my body just rolls and dodges on its own… Reminds me of our training.’

The members didn’t see the current situation, rolling on the ground to dodge attacks due to an unfamiliar ability, as a humiliation. If they ended up with mere scrapes instead of fatal wounds, that was indeed a job well done.

The only frustration was not being able to find a solution before Nukijo’s reinforcements arrived.

In the midst of the turmoil, a realization dawned: “This can’t just end with us dodging attacks, there must be a way out…!”

As urgency crept into their minds, the movements of the members began to falter. Eventually, a couple of them, trying to evade the attack of the stealth Awakener, collided with each other in the darkness.

“Ugh!”

The enemy didn’t miss this opportunity and launched an attack. It was at that very moment, as the members bit their lips and tried to dodge with all their might, that a blade, its arrival unnoticed, clashed sharply against metal, perfectly blocking the invisible attack in mid-air.

At the end of that blade, the one clutching the hilt was none other than Nathan Zuckerman, who had been quietly observing the situation.

“Sir Zuckerman!”

The Southern knight, who had forcefully pushed back the invisible attacker's weapon, glanced at the Cavalry members and spoke.

"I've roughly figured out the attack pattern. I'll hold them off, so step back for a moment, assess the injuries, and regroup."

"But…!"

"We are all starting to lose our composure and get weary. If we don't act now, someone will definitely get seriously injured…"

Clang. Mid-sentence, Nathan Zuckerman moved like lightning in another direction, his sword raised.

With a short burst of sparks in the air and a collision sound, it was evident that Nathan Zuckerman's opponent, unable to handle the difference in the skillfully deflected force, was flung away. Zuckerman turned his gaze in the direction of the sound, feeling no mercy.

The Cavalry members, who had thought of Nathan Zuckerman as an ordinary knight they had to protect, were shocked at his agile response and piercing gaze, moving as if he could see through the darkness.

'What? It was fast, but didn't seem like a forceful move…?'

'He figured out the invisible attack pattern? How?'

However, the rigorous training of the Cavalry had also honed their ability to make quick judgments in battle.

'If someone else can do what I can't, don't try to help unnecessarily. Just step back. Clumsy help can sometimes be worse than a hindrance.'

Recalling this lesson, they set aside their questions about Nathan Zuckerman's mysterious strength and quickly withdrew, following his request.

"Understood, Sir Zuckerman! Everyone, fall back! Assess your condition first!"

Meanwhile, Nathan Zuckerman engaged in several more light exchanges with the opponent. 'Light' by his standards, as the opponent was repeatedly thrown against the ceiling or walls, yet stubbornly not making a sound and quickly hiding again, making it hard to pinpoint their location.

Nathan Zuckerman, opening all his senses, walked slowly, deeply exhaling as he tried to determine the opponent's location.

'A foe more difficult to capture alive than to kill. Quite tricky.'

Even he, who could elevate his senses far beyond that of ordinary people, had never encountered an enemy who could erase their presence so completely. It seemed certain that the opponent was not professionally trained, yet it had taken a long time to figure out the pattern of their attacks.

Based on what he had deduced so far, the stealth Awakener was definitely small and not particularly strong. They were likely keeping low to maximize the effectiveness of their attacks in this invisible state, but they didn't seem accustomed to this kind of approach. Their movements and attacks were simple, lacking anything extraordinary, which only confirmed his suspicions.

If only their forms had been visible, the Cavalry members could have easily dealt with them. However, that extraordinary ability to erase not just their presence and sound, but even their weapons into the darkness, compensated for all their vulnerabilities. This very weakness made predicting their movements all the more challenging.

‘Even so…’

It wasn’t impossible to find them.

Even the Cavalry, honed by training, could narrowly evade the attacks with their heightened senses. For Nathan Zuckerman, whose senses were intensely sharpened, the slightest changes made by the enemy’s movements were as clear as thunder and storms.

‘It’s coming from that direction this time.’

Nathan Zuckerman, catching the subtle shift in the air, turned his head. Realizing that he had roughly pinpointed his location, the stealth Awakener tried a different attack this time.

‘If they can make their weapons invisible, it’s likely they’ve hidden something like a magic-infused dagger or a poison dart as a last resort.’

In a brief moment, Nathan Zuckerman, anticipating the enemy’s possible actions, raised his sword to protect the Cavalry members.

Just as a bright blue aura began to emanate from his hand, a sharp voice echoed from somewhere.

“Stop!”

Along with the voice, things previously unseen revealed themselves before their eyes.

Nathan Zuckerman boldly discovered a woman, who had approached close enough to launch a dart, and swiftly lowered his raised sword, retreating back. The dart she fired helplessly embedded itself in an empty wall.

“What’s happening? My power isn’t working!”

“Sir Zuckerman! Are you alright?”

The Cavalry members behind Nathan Zuckerman, intending to assist him, cried out in surprise.

The stealth Awakener, realizing she was visible to others, was just as shocked.

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Chapter 678

“Sir Zuckerman! Are you alright?”

The Cavalry members behind Nathan Zuckerman, intending to assist him, cried out in surprise.

The stealth Awakener, realizing she was visible to others, was just as shocked.

Suddenly, the power that had cloaked her vanished. Her attempts to become invisible again were futile, as she couldn’t muster her strength properly.

The stealth Awakener, now exposed for all to see, looked much as Nathan Zuckerman had anticipated. She was short and slender, with long hair tied up. Clutching her injured arm, she bit her lip hard.

Amid the tense and bewildered situation, a voice of salvation reached the Cavalry members.

“It seems we’ve arrived just in time.”

“Commander!”

The members shouted in unison, like children reunited with long-lost parents.

Shortly after, many figures emerged from the dark passage. Initially, everyone assumed they were Nukijo’s men, as sensed by Sunz’s vision ability. But they were wrong.

Kishiar, leading the group, revealed his true face, smiling at his comrades. His striking beauty shone even in the darkness, or

perhaps it was the solemn and serious Awakener behind him. Their arrival felt like a scene from a mythological painting.

As the escaping VIPs and Nukijo's underlings momentarily lost touch with reality, the Cavalry members joyously called out to another figure.

"Yuder!"

Only then did people notice the man in a long cloak with black hair standing beside Kishiar. His pale, blood-smeared appearance was eerily ghostlike.

Those familiar with Yuder knew better than to mistake his appearance for serious injury.

"How many did he fight to be so bloodied? A hundred?"

"I bet he beat one by himself to death."

"This isn't the time for such talk."

Hearing his comrades' whispers, Yuder spoke quietly, his gaze as sharp as ever. The members quickly offered awkward smiles and apologies.

"Oh, sorry, Baron. It's not that we didn't want to handle the situation, it's just…"

"But no one's seriously hurt… probably… not yet…?"

Their faces, now relaxed and joking in the presence of trusted allies, were bright and cheerful. Yuder eventually softened his piercing gaze, sighed quietly, and looked away. It was a signal of his tacit forgiveness.

Kishiar, where Yuder's gaze rested, took over the conversation.

“It’s fortunate that no one’s gravely injured, but we must act swiftly as there are still wounded. To begin with…”

His red eyes slowly scanned the Nukijo gang, the exposed stealth Awakener, and the combatants from the arena.

“Dealing with these individuals is our first priority.”

One of Nukijo’s men, his voice trembling, cried out.

“What in the world happened? Only our people should have access to this passage… Are… are all those below dead?”

“The master of this place sought only to save himself and met his demise. Not all others are dead, but they will face their retribution.”

“It can’t be…”

Kishiar’s succinct explanation left Nukijo’s underlings shouting in disbelief, the VIPs equally shocked.

“Nukijo is dead?”

Despite their desire to flee, with the Cavalry surrounding them both front and back, there was nowhere to go. They desperately claimed their innocence, causing an uproar.

“I don’t even know who this Nukijo or whatever is! These people here, they kidnapped me!”

“Yes, I was only threatened. I don’t know anything about this place. Truly!”

“Damn it. Regina! What are you doing? Use your power to break us out!”

One of them shouted at the dazed stealth Awakener, Regina, who had been motionless since hearing of Nukijo’s self-destruction,

perhaps even before that. She simply stared blankly into the distance.

“Regina!”

“Urging that Awakener will gain us nothing. This place is under a power-suppressing influence, disabling any Awakener from using their powers,” Kishiar explained with a smile, reminding everyone of the voice they had heard earlier, commanding them to stop.

It was after that voice that the stealth Awakener, previously perfectly hidden, was suddenly revealed.

The power-suppressing Awakener, Reneve, appeared among them, following Kishiar’s gesture. She was dressed in flamboyantly mismatched clothes, with disheveled hair and a gaunt, skeletal figure, wearing clunky, oversized boots. Her gaze had been fixed on one spot even before she stepped forward.

Reneve was looking at Regina.

And Regina, bleeding from her limbs, was looking back at Reneve.

Without a word, they just stared at each other, until Kishiar spoke.

“Reneve. And Cyregina. Fortunate that we could reunite those who were held here for so long, trying to save each other. Without my assistant, the whole truth would have remained hidden.”

The other Cavalry members and bystanders looked curious at his words, but Kishiar offered no further explanation, instead calmly ordering the binding of Nukijo’s other subordinates and the VIPs.

Even without their powers, the task was well within the capabilities of the Cavalry members present. Yuder, amidst the

chaotic scene, watched the two women staring blankly at each other, recalling the events just before his arrival here.

“Aaaah!”

“Boss!”

Right before Elpkins was about to pass through the hole, Yuder had successfully diverted an arrow aimed at him, embedding it into Nukijo’s shoulder instead. As Nukijo crumbled with a scream, his men were struck with terror.

“A monster…”

The thought that further attack was futile dominated their minds. Yuder, facing those dropping their weapons and looking at him in fear, spoke expressionlessly.

“Drop your weapons and kneel. If you surrender willingly, I won’t attack further.”

Silence.

“I am with the Cavalry. Reinforcements will soon arrive from outside. The VIPs you helped escape won’t get a chance to return home. Surrender while I’m asking nicely.”

Could it be true? Someone, upon making eye contact with Yuder, involuntarily dropped their weapon and then abruptly kneeled, hunching over. It was the one closest to Yuder. He glanced at them briefly before moving on. Realizing he wouldn’t attack, others nearby also began to drop their weapons one by one.

Of course, there were those who did not surrender, but Yuder dealt with them without a word of excuse, striking them down and sending them flying. Nothing could block his path.

Nukijo, realizing the monsters footsteps were approaching him, clutched his arrow-pierced shoulder and muttered to himself.

“The Cavalry…? That man?”

He had thought him a mere fool, but he was mistaken. That man had infiltrated this place from the beginning to bring it down.

When exactly had the Cavalry, thought to be busy recruiting new members, set their sights on this place? And why had he only realized it now? Why had no one hinted at it?

Regret filled him for not keeping his secret weapon close, instead of sending it away for the VIPs. But it was too late for such thoughts.

A person cornered often feels as if all their misfortunes were part of a deliberate plan against them. Nukijo felt the same. Overwhelmed with a sense of injustice, he speculated that perhaps someone among his enemies had secretly passed information about this place to the Cavalry.

‘Then…!’

“I’ll give you money…!” he offered desperately.

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Chapter 679

“…I’ll give you money!”

The cry, born of desperation, flowed out, causing Yuder’s footsteps to momentarily halt.

“How much would it take for you to just leave? A hundred thousand gold coins? No, maybe half a million would be better. That’s a fair amount for a mutual benefit, right? It wouldn’t be a bad deal for the Cavalry either, would it?”

Nukijo played to his strengths. Convincing people to turn a blind eye to their deeds was one of his easiest tasks. Not a single soldier, knight, administrator, or mage remained unaffected by his propositions.

Slowly, Yuder’s eyes narrowed. The sight of blood dripping from his stained fingertips was terrifying, yet since Yuder had ceased moving, Nukijo believed his approach was working. He hurriedly began another proposal.

“Listen. If receiving a lump sum is too much, how about we take a little from our earnings each month? If you want women, we’ll send women; if men, then men. Besides, we can bridge a connection between the Cavalry and the high officials of Charloin! Isn’t that enough?”

Nukijo was met with a gaze as dark and bottomless as a deep abyss.

After a moment, Yuder slowly spoke. “To think that the Cavalry, created for the Awakeners, would turn a blind eye for mere money and connections… You dream big.”

What? The Awakeners? Nukijo's mind raced.

"The Awakeners? Ah, right. If the Awakeners are the problem, then we won't hold these Awakener fights. I'll abolish it right away. Will that suffice?"

A faint twist formed at the corner of Yuder's lips. "You expect me to believe you'd give up so easily."

"Look, the supply… I mean, finding talented participants has been tough lately. It hasn't been very profitable. Managing the risks is exhausting, and I was even considering closing it down. I was so desperate, I even thought about killing those who advised me to build the second and third underground floors… to make them take responsibility."

His skill in swiftly changing his words upon seeing Yuder's expression was evident.

"…"

"Even if some Awakeners occasionally insist on participating in the regular fighting pits, we can't stop them all… but if you dislike that too, we'll make it stop. It's easier for us too!"

Of course, it was a lie. But there was nothing he wouldn't say to deceive.

"Awakeners who insist on participating? Those trapped here would have laughed to hear that."

"Trapped? Who are you talking about? The one with wings? Do you know how much debt he's in? Of course, those in debt would curse me! I've always been a man of my word!"

Nukijo had even forgotten the name of the Elpkins he had ruined. Yuder gazed at him intently before speaking.

“You. Do you remember the Awakener you’ve imprisoned here for over a year?”

“Imprisoned…? Ah! That Durban girl. What nonsense. I’ve been paying her salary and even provided her with expensive clothes and a room.”

If one had not seen the conditions in which Reneve lived, Nukijo’s confident tone might have made them believe his words.

“Since arriving here, she’s been searching for a friend who came with her. Why didn’t you show her? Is she already dead?”

“Dead? Who said that? All those girls are alive and well.”

Yuder’s gaze shifted subtly. Nukijo quickly noticed his interest in the matter. The man who had shown little concern for money or connections was now reacting, and Nukijo swiftly surmised this could be the key to saving both his life and the fighting pit.

“Yes, were you curious about this? The two women from Durban are both alive. I don’t lie. They were alive and did their jobs quite well here.”

“But why didn’t you show them?”

“Because…”

While clutching his head, dizzy from the loss of blood, Nukijo simultaneously sent a covert signal to his subordinates.

‘Open the passage between the first and second floors. I’ll escape then; help me.’

The faces of his men, knowing what lay there, momentarily turned pale. Nukijo, undeterred, continued to babble.

“The problem was that both women had awakened. You understand, managing staff is no ordinary task. It’s troublesome if they start having other thoughts instead of focusing on their duties here. One had the power to suppress power, and the other one…”

He stopped mid-sentence and fumbled in his pocket, pressing a button on a magic tool and signaling his men.

‘Now!’

With a loud thud, a passage next to the stage behind Yuder opened.

“Screams of terror and panic filled the air as Nukijo’s men, previously kneeling in surrender, began to flee in absolute fear.

Yuder turned his head. From the dark, gaping maw of the passage, something approached at a rapid pace. It carried a cold, dark aura, as if it was not of this world. The pungent stench of decay and blood hit his nose. His instincts as an Awakener, honed by countless similar situations, immediately recognized the entity.

It was…

“The boss has opened all the monster cages!”

Emerging from the passage were monsters with countless writhing, octopus-like legs, stained with ominous colors and glistening grotesquely. Their bodies and heads were hard to discern amid the tangled mass of limbs.

Although the monsters didn’t appear large or fast, Nukijo’s men were desperately fleeing for their lives. The reason soon became apparent.

Aaaa

A scream echoed as a limb of one of the monsters suddenly stretched out, shooting forward like a harpoon to grab one of the fleeing men. The captured subordinate of Nukijo struggled in vain, trying to tear away from the monster's grasp.

In the blink of an eye, the continuously extending limb pulled the victim into a writhing mass of legs, engulfing him. His limbs, flailing in resistance, twitched as they were drawn between the monster's legs, soon withering away as if all his fluids had been drained.

Yuder swiftly approached and swung his sword, wrapped in flames. The monster, emitting a bizarre cry, writhed but did not release its victim. Yuder's strength seemed formidable but was not enough to intimidate the monster.

Only after slicing through several legs with a sword that was more effective than his strength did the monster finally regurgitate its victim. However, the man was already reduced to a skeletal, perforated corpse, desiccated from head to toe.

Silence fell as a sense of danger crawled up Yuder's spine. Turning, he saw Nukijo, supported by his men, already disappearing into the distance.

He released all the monsters brought in for the fighting pit… Such a move would not leave him unscathed either.

"Save me!"

Aaaa

Amidst the screams, another monster near Yuder extended its limbs towards him. He leaped over it gracefully, but there was more than one monster, and they had even more limbs.

Like starved creatures, the monsters swarmed, endlessly stretching their limbs. They didn't mind getting tangled with each

other, harshly pulling and swallowing anything they caught. Simply put, they were the perfect monsters for creating a terrifying spectacle in the arena, grabbing and sucking blood and fluids before spitting out when their prey was gone.

‘I’ve never seen these monsters before, but… I can tell they’re hunting by sound.’

For the first time in a while, Yuder’s past life experience proved useful. With so many types of monsters, it was impossible to know everything at a glance, but with experience, he could guess their characteristics just by a brief confrontation. Meanwhile, Yuder exerted the power of the earth to ensure Nukijo couldn’t escape. Although the monsters were difficult to kill, he had no problem destroying other things.

‘Did you think I would let you escape easily?’

With a loud crash, the door in the direction Nukijo’s men were heading shattered, blocking their path. The men yelled something, and the monsters, recognizing the direction, extended their limbs mercilessly, chasing new victims.

Yuder contemplated whether it would be better to just bring down the entire place as the monsters, having fed plentifully, moved faster and more relentlessly, their numerous reappearing limbs making it difficult for him to keep up.

Before he could slice off another silently approaching limb from behind, something from the opposite side seemed to grab and tear it away, and someone landed beside him.

“Are you alright?”

Kishiar straightened up from his landing pose, surveying Yuder from head to toe. The other Awakeners, who had stopped in their tracks upon seeing the monster, indicated that Kishiar, having

finished organizing the backstage area, had rushed here first upon noticing the situation.

Yuder quickly explained to the man inspecting the blood on his body.

“Of course, it’s not my blood. I haven’t been injured yet.”

“There’s a scrape here.”

“Such a scratch can be caused by a mere fingernail.”

Kishiar faintly smiled at Yuder’s blunt rebuttal.

“So, how did this situation arise?”

“I was almost done dealing with Nukijo and could have finished everything. But I got distracted by something troubling, and during that moment, he opened the monster cages.”

“Monsters are beings beyond human control. He blinded himself to the danger, making the worst choice of using his men as sacrifices for a brief escape.”

“Fortunately, you arrived quickly.”

Yuder knew that to deal with the monsters using his strength alone, he would need to employ indirect methods rather than attacking the monsters directly, inevitably causing more damage to the property. Already having created a hole in the roof, he hesitated to cause further destruction, considering it risky. But with Kishiar’s arrival, he no longer needed to worry about that aspect.

“Let’s quickly clear this up without causing any more damage to the building than necessary.”

“Agreed.”

Kishiar then loudly commanded the other Awakeners, who were standing frozen in fear at a distance.

“Mer, Daila! Check! Bet!”

“Yes, yes?”

The ones specifically named by Kishiar reacted with surprise.

“Since these monsters respond to sound, create as much noise as possible with your abilities to distract them. Everyone, except for Reneve, be cautious not to get caught by the legs and deal with the monsters accordingly. I’ll tell you what needs to be done from now on…”

Kishiar’s commands were quick and precise. In just a brief conversation, he had managed to identify and remember the names and abilities of each Awakener. As he called out each Awakeners, instructing them on how to counter the monsters, the fear-stricken faces gradually shifted.

The thought that it might be worth a try began to emerge.

“Avoid separating, and assist each other to prevent getting caught by the legs. Stay vigilant.”

“Yes!”

The Awakeners responded reflexively, exchanging bewildered glances before mustering the courage to dash forward. Kishiar and Yuder, as if by agreement, stood back to back.

Yuder gripped his sword, feeling Kishiar’s warmth through their touching backs.

Even knowing that monsters were his weakness, the man didn’t ask Yuder to step back. He knew Yuder could handle it, however

challenging it might be.

His trust and emotions flowed distinctly through their connected skin.

‘I can do this.’

No longer did anything seem worrisome.

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Chapter 680

Until just yesterday, the Awakeners trapped on the third underground floor were in a position where they had to fight each other upon encounter. In the face of the harsh reality that not killing the other meant their own death, any friendship or dialogue was meaningless.

However, now they were using their powers not to kill each other, but to save one another.

“Watch out over there!”

“Ah, thank you Thank you.”

“No, it’s nothing”

An Awakener, who almost got caught by a monster’s extended limb, was saved by the power of another Awakener. Both the rescuer and the rescued awkwardly avoided each other’s gaze, but did not forget to express their gratitude.

As time passed, the greetings they exchanged gradually gained more sincerity. Helping each other led to more shared glances, and strangely, a warm and tingling feeling grew inside their hearts.

It was a camaraderie born from facing the same enemy and enduring the same hardships.

Until Kishiar reminded them to forget that they were once enemies, such feelings did not exist. The Awakeners, who understood his words intellectually but not emotionally, eventually began to accept them sincerely.

They fought shoulder to shoulder outside the arena they thought they could only leave in death, effectively countering the monsters. Despite being new to this style of combat, they were surprisingly effective by simply following Kishiar's instructions. Though some were in danger due to unfamiliarity with their powers, there was no significant concern.

Two members of the Cavalry at the forefront, back to back in battle, were performing feats worth a hundred soldiers.

Their fight was truly remarkable. Armed with nothing more than an ordinary sword, the attacks they unleashed were incomparably powerful. Watching them, each guarding the other's back, fighting more monsters than anyone, one could forget what they were doing, so captivating was the sight.

A tall man would entangle a monster's approaching limb, while a man with black hair would find and precisely strike a hidden weak point amidst the writhing limbs. Conversely, when the black-haired man used his powers to manipulate debris and elements to thwart the monsters, the tall man would return from slaying others and swiftly dispatch them with concise movements.

The black-haired man, though not directly attacking the monsters with anything but his sword, was still a formidable threat to the enemy. This was possible because the tall man moved in perfect harmony with him, like a pair of smoothly functioning weapons.

Without a single word exchanged, they assisted each other's movements so quickly and accurately that most Awakeners could not fully grasp what abilities they were using or how.

Despite their seemingly different styles, there was a peculiar similarity in their fighting, perhaps because they both belonged to the same Cavalry.

It was an enigma, but their fearless and overwhelming combat inspired courage in others.

With a screeching cry, the last of the monsters fell. It had been thrown into disarray by the Awakeners' sonic attacks, losing direction and rampaging, only to be taken down by a combined attack from the black-haired man and the tall man.

Wow!

As the monster fell with a thud, the Awakeners, as if by some unspoken agreement, let out cries of joy and embraced each other.

The surroundings were a mess, but no further damage to the buildings and no casualties among the Awakeners meant it was indeed a perfect victory.

Yuder, looking back at the cheering Awakeners, sheathed his sword. Kishiar, standing where he turned, smiled silently at him.

Yuder deeply exhaled, still feeling the aftermath of the battle. It was rare for him to feel good after a fight, but this time was different. The sensation of his blood boiling from head to toe, fiercely pounding his heart, was an incomparable thrill and pleasure.

It was undoubtedly because of Kishiar La Orr.

He had undergone various trainings with the Cavalry, but never had he fought in sync with someone like this. It was the same in his previous life.

However, the sensation of their backs meeting for the first time wasn't the slightest bit awkward, and the warmth brushing by his side allowed him to immerse deeper into the battle. Kishiar, not using sword aura but merely an old, rusted sword and the push and pull power, perfectly matched Yuder's pace.

Considering Kishiar’s scarce experience in direct combat, it was truly unbelievable.

Is it strange to say I feel good after directly engaging in battle for almost the first time?

Then, Kishiar quietly whispered something not much different from Yuder’s thoughts.

Yuder, feeling as if his thoughts were read, slowly shook his head.

It’s not strange. …I feel the same.

A clear, refreshing smile soon appeared on Kishiar’s face, who had his eyes slightly widened.

Right.

For a moment, Yuder wished to see the real face of the smiling man.

But part of him was also relieved it didn’t happen. If he had faced that face while his blood was still hot, he might have kissed him, unable to resist. A fierce satisfaction and ravenous longing simultaneously scratched the pit of his stomach before fading away.

It was partly due to the scream heard from afar.

Aaargh!

Yuder turned his head.

Due to his power, the movement toward the exit was blocked. A commotion arose from Nukijo and his subordinates, who had been evading the monster’s attacks.

Approaching, he saw Nukijo stabbed and collapsed, the perpetrator being one of his subordinates who had tried to flee with him. The man, battered and bruised, glared at Nukijo.

You tried to save yourself by sacrificing us…?

Throughout the battle with the monster, Nukijo had pushed his subordinates to death to save himself whenever he felt endangered. The one who stabbed him had been the last remaining, having nearly been caught and killed by the monster in Nukijo's stead.

In a desperate struggle to not die, he wrestled with Nukijo, who was pushing him towards the monster. In the chaotic fight, both nearly faced death several times, but the younger and stronger subordinate seized an opportunity first.

Taking advantage of the moment when Yuder, Kishiar, and the other Awakeners had finished off the monster, he pushed Nukijo down, grabbed a fallen sword, and stabbed him with all his might. It was a fatal wound, right in the center of the chest.

As Yuder and Kishiar approached, he discarded his weapon and surrendered, saying that he had taken care of Nukijo, who deserved to be killed, so please spare him.

Yuder looked down at Nukijo, who seemed on the verge of losing his breath, and furrowed his brow.

Reaping what he sowed.

"Please… save me… I beg you…"

Recognizing Yuder approaching, Nukijo, with a hand pressed over a blood-gushing wound, begged for his life. However, considering the flow of blood and the wound, even a priest with healing powers akin to Lusan would struggle to save him.

When Yuder remained silent, Nukijo continued in a gasping voice.

“The information… you wanted… I’ll tell you… That Durban, those women…”

“…”

“The name… Re, Regina… she, can, make herself invisible… wouldn’t let her escape… she just, went outside… Save me, and I’ll tell you who…”

Nukijo, struggling to speak, suddenly fell silent. Yuder waited, but no further words came. He realized that Nukijo had stopped breathing and frowned.

To die mid-sentence, eyes wide open - it was a pitiful and hollow death.

Yuder, looking down at Nukijo’s corpse, turned to his subordinate, who still held a posture of surrender.

“Nukijo mentioned a person named Regina, an Awakener with the ability to become invisible. Do you know anything about her?”

The subordinate, unaware that Regina was an Awakener, knew quite a bit about her. To save his own life, he revealed everything he knew.

According to him, Regina’s real name was Cyregina. He did not mention her being from Durban, but the name itself was common there, so those who heard it guessed her origin.

“She never listened to anyone but Nukijo. She said following Nukijo’s orders was the only way to gain permission to descend to the third basement and get promoted, so she did all kinds of dirty work. She often got beaten for not doing well, though…”

Regina was competent in handling VIP guests but showed little enthusiasm in recruiting new Awakeners. The Awakeners she managed often failed to show up at the arena or realized something was amiss and tried to escape, causing trouble.

As a result, Regina was frequently beaten by Nukijo. Sometimes to the point of breaking bones, but she never cried or ran away, stubbornly obeying Nukijo to an exasperating extent.

‘Permission to the third basement. The abilities of Reneve and Cyregina… Yes. I’m beginning to understand.’

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Chapter 681

‘Permission to the third basement. The abilities of Reneve and Cyregina… Yes. I’m beginning to understand.’

Earlier, Nukijo had mentioned that the problem was that both individuals from Durban had awakened their powers.

On the day Reneve awakened, it wasn’t just her. Her longed-for friend, Cyril, also known as Cyregina, had awakened as well.

Reneve’s ability was to suppress the power of other Awakeners, and if Cyregina’s ability was to make her body and weapons invisible, could there be a better combination for escaping from there?

If Reneve had known that Cyregina was alive and possessed such an ability, she would not have remained so quietly confined for so long. A plan to escape with the others trapped in the surrounding rooms, by communicating with them and releasing their suppressed abilities, would have quickly formed in her mind.

Nukijo’s insistence that Reneve use her power, whether awake or asleep, now seems not only to prevent the Awakeners on the third floor from escaping. Perhaps it was also to preemptively prevent Cyregina, unable to bear it, from secretly trying to meet Reneve.

Even if Cyregina used her invisibility to sneak into the third underground floor, her invisibility would dissipate as soon as she stepped in, due to Reneve’s power supression ability.

Cyregina, despite her remarkable ability, had no choice but to serve under Nukijo and be absolutely obedient to gain access to the third floor, probably for that reason.

However, Nukijo likely never intended to let the two meet, regardless of how obedient and compliant they were.

If only one of them had awakened. Or if Cyregina's ability wasn't invisibility that allowed attacks while hidden, things might not have escalated to this extent. It was indeed a cruel twist of fate.

"You died too easily."

Yuder coldly gazed at Nukijo's corpse, then felt a cloth settle on his shoulders and turned his head. Kishiar, who had draped the cloak over him, smiled brightly as their eyes met.

"Now that there's no need to keep wearing those clothes, you should put on something warm."

"…Thank you, but isn't this your garment, Commander?"

They were currently wearing clothes said to have been worn by boys and girls in ancient times during ceremonies to wish for victory. The attire, revealing much skin and loosely fitted with no buttons but only a few golden strings tied in knots, was hardly suitable for winter. However, its design allowed unencumbered movement, which was an advantage.

The existence of these clothes and the changing room were disclosed by Elpkins and other Awakeners who had subdued Nukijo's group backstage. The backstage area included a makeshift changing room where concept costumes, created anew for each day's combat, were stored. Clothes for the day's participants were already laid out there for them to change into.

Reluctantly, they had to wear these to avoid suspicion before going on stage and starting their task.

Fortunately, the design was somewhat better than the rag-like garment Elpkins originally wore, which barely covered the essentials.

However, Kishiar managed to pull off even that unrealistic attire terrifyingly well. Although his face was vaguely altered, his body remained unchanged. His broad shoulders and slender waist made even the roughest sack look as if it were custom-made for him.

According to the Awakeners, those participating for the first time today could wear robes or cloaks over their clothes without arousing suspicion. Thus, they wrapped themselves in the outer garments they had originally worn. The rest of the clothes were distributed to other Awakeners like Elpkins, who were dressed in sacks.

Kishiar had kept his outer garment on all this while, but Yuder had discarded his earlier, resulting in his body being splattered with blood here and there. He was concerned about soiling Kishiar's clean cloak with this mess.

"I'm fine, please just take it."

"There's too much blood on you. If you go out like this, you'll lose body heat."

Yuder didn't seem to mind the blood, considering it wasn't his own and he could summon fire if he got cold.

"Then, I'll go and fetch the clothes I threw away earlier."

"This one?"

At some unknown point, Kishiar had picked up Yuder's discarded garment, now a black, tattered cloth bundle. It was ripped and covered in various liquids and dirt.

"I saw it on the way here, but it's already been trampled and ruined."

"…"

“This cloak is enchanted like your gloves. It’s made of a fabric that doesn’t easily stain. Don’t worry and wear it. That’s why I kept it on.”

His last words were almost a whisper, soft yet tinged with an unwillingness that made it difficult to refuse.

Perhaps Kishiar had been quite concerned about Yuder’s condition without showing it during the fight.

“But if I wear this, won’t you, Commander, get cold?”

“Don’t forget that I’ve seen the pinnacle of swordsmanship. This is nothing to me. And we’ll likely meet Nathan on our way out. He must have brought an outer garment, knowing the plan.”

Yuder wondered if it wouldn’t be better for him to wear one of Nathan Zuckerman’s garments. However, Kishiar’s expression was resolute and radiant, seeming unyielding to any suggestion.

‘Hmm… From experience, this isn’t a mood to refuse.’

Kishiar, who usually didn’t obstruct Yuder’s actions, could persuade him perfectly when needed. His current reaction was strikingly similar to the firm yet gentle demeanor he had shown when he was blinded in the Great Sarain Forest.

Finally, Yuder nodded in agreement. Only then did Kishiar smile and properly tie the cloak. Wearing the cloak didn’t completely hide the blood splattered all over him, but it was enough to prevent people from recoiling in shock at first glance.

Just then, the Awakeners, having calmed their excitement from the victory, approached them. They were startled to see Nukijo’s dead body but soon murmured with mixed emotions.

“Is he dead?”

“Really dead? Just like that?”

Nukijo had been at the top of the power structure inside the fighting arena. The Awakeners felt a mixture of emptiness, anger, and relief that such a seemingly indestructible figure had died so vainly. They regretted that he died too easily for his deeds, but the sight of his corpse also brought a sense of real relief that the nightmare was finally over.

The surviving subordinates of Nukijo merely looked on, with no one lamenting the death of their leader. Thus, Nukijo’s body was left untouched, his eyes unshut.

They gathered Nukijo’s subordinates, who showed no further will to resist, and tightly bound them together. This was to facilitate an easier handling for the Cavalry members who would join them later.

During this time, Yuder called Reneve, who had been standing at the back, to inform her about the whereabouts of the friend she had been so desperately searching for.

“Before Nukijo died, I was fortunate to learn about your friend’s fate. It turns out she was alive.”

“Cyril… she was alive? Are you sure?”

Reneve, who had believed Cyril to be utterly deceased, displayed a mix of bewilderment and joy, but Yuder, knowing her happiness would not last, suppressed his emotions.

“Before I proceed, I want to confirm if your friend’s real name is Cyregina.”

“Ah… Yes, that’s right. Cyril is just a Durban-style nickname. We never used her real name… But why do you ask?”

It was as expected; the probability that Cyregina was not Cyril was nonexistent. Yuder took a deep breath and spoke softly.

“It seems she was here, just like you. She served under Nukijo and went by the name Regina.”

“Under Nukijo, as a subordinate?”

Reneve questioned in disbelief, doubting her ears at such an unexpected revelation.

“No… That can’t be. Would she continue to work here, knowing I am here? In this dreadful place? Are you sure theres no mistake? If she worked here… they would have no reason to hide Cyril’s fate from me. What exactly…”

“The truth can only be confirmed by the person herself, but I suspect the reason might have been to save you.”

“To save me?”

As Reneve asked in a daze, the young Awakeners of the Star of Nagran, who were nearby, perked up their ears and turned their heads. The familiar name had caught their attention.

“Regina? We know her. She was the one who led us here.”

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Chapter 682

“Regina? We know her. She was the one who led us here.”

After those words, the young Awakeners began to chatter among themselves.

“That person we saw yesterday and today, her name was Regina, right? She explained to us about the Awakeners’ arena and asked if we were interested.”

“Ah, the one who did the final check before the fight began? Yes, that was her name.”

“She seemed kind when inviting us to the arena, but today, she was a bit scary. Looking back, she probably didn’t need to be nice anymore, knowing what this place was”

The speaker was Jack, the curly-haired boy who had almost fought Yuder. As Jack spoke, Reneve’s face stiffened rapidly, while his friends shook their heads, offering a different perspective.

“That’s not it. She didn’t suddenly become scary today; we’ve felt something odd about her since yesterday. Don’t you remember worrying if it was really okay for us to fight here?”

“Right. Jack, you were too excited about earning money to listen properly. I felt different. She kept telling us frightening things, making me wonder if this place wasn’t meant for kids like us.”

“I felt the same! When I hesitated to sign the application, she whispered in my ear that if I was scared, I should just leave… I signed it impulsively, but now I regret not walking away.”

“Really? I just thought she went on about how dangerous it could be, but also how much money we could make…”

Jack mumbled, looking bewildered.

Yuder gleaned new information from the disjointed conversation about Regina, who had been nervous about missing colleagues while doing the last checks before the fight.

Her stern attitude towards the boys and the mention that she could not go further to check on her absent colleagues suggested a harsh demeanor. However, now knowing that Regina was actually Cyril, Yuder’s perception of these details shifted.

After hearing this, Yuder turned to Reneve. She looked back at him with a complex gaze, demanding the truth.

“Tell me everything. What happened to Cyril? All of it.”

“Understood.”

Yuder succinctly narrated the facts he had gathered and surmised from Nukijo and the surroundings.

Regina, as an Awakener with the power of invisibility, had been tasked by Nukijo to deal with Awakeners trying to escape the arena. She did whatever Nukijo asked, aiming for a promotion and the permission to descend to the third underground level.

He also shared that Nukijo seemed reluctant to let Reneve and Regina meet, possibly fearing they might join forces and escape.

After hearing everything, Reneve was speechless for a long time.

Although she had been imprisoned for a long while, she was not foolish. She quickly grasped how Nukijo had manipulated them and

the resulting situation they were in. The news of her long-lost friend's survival brought no joy, only a realization she couldn't celebrate.

Reneve remained silent thereafter, lost in deep despair and shock, no longer processing the words spoken to her.

In the midst of the chaos, the Awakeners who were tidying up the scene discovered the entrance to a secret passage that Nukijo was about to enter and cleared the debris blocking the way. The passage, gaping darkly, was a mess with dozens of footprints left in haste by the departing VIPs. Having confirmed this, Kishiar commanded everyone to enter the passage.

Finally, in front of the Awakeners filled with the hope of escape, he twisted the magic tool to reveal his true face completely.

Ah, the face…?

At last, I can properly introduce myself with my real face.

Stunned by his astonishing appearance, the Awakeners couldnt hide their overwhelming emotions even as they feared upon hearing him introduce himself as the Commander of the Cavalry, Kishiar.

Ah…!

It's because everyone contributed their strength that we could come this far without anyone getting hurt. Trust me and follow, I will do my best until the end.

Of course.

The Awakeners responded energetically. However, even as they ascended the secret passage, Reneve silently kept to the back, maintaining his quiet.

Yuder glanced at her before speaking softly to Kishiar.

What do you plan to do with those captured here?

Well… I plan to stick to the original plan.

According to the original plan, Nukijo and his remnants should be immediately arrested and pay the price according to the law. They had been involved in illegal human trafficking and had sacrificed many in the fighting pits, so they deserved no less than the death penalty.

Even those who merely followed Nukijo but did not participate in the pit fights should be investigated for their crimes and duly punished. Only by administering proper justice could they justify going after others operating illegal fighting rings beyond Nukijo.

However, the case of Cyregina was more complicated. Even if she didnt follow Nukijo by her own will, the crimes she committed were clear.

According to other Awakeners, even while working under Nukijo, she seemed to have tried to do what she could for others… But if thats true, it leaves a bitter taste.

As a Commander, Yuder knew that not everyone could be saved according to the situation. Thats what he had learned during his long tenure as Commander Yudrain Aile. If a crime was committed, it was right to pay the price.

But he felt uneasy knowing that Nukijo was the root cause.

If that guy had lived, we could have squeezed out evidence and testimony about this matter and sorted out the disputes more clearly.

Judging a case based only on circumstances was extremely tricky. It was even more so when it came to meting out punishment for crimes. Without clear evidence, Cyregina was likely to face a

harsh sentence. While Yuder pondered this, Kishiar seemed to read his thoughts and spoke.

Are you concerned?

Yes.

Yuder answered honestly.

It is indeed a complex matter. But theres always a way.

Do you have something in mind?

Responding to Yuders question, Kishiar spoke in a gentle voice.

Before apprehending those who have sinned, theres a law that allows for leniency through negotiation if someone from the inside turns in favor of justice and assists the investigation. Like that person earlier who killed Nukijo and begged for his life.

…

Hasnt Cyregina still got one more chance to prove that she truly didnt follow Nukijo willingly and could, given the right circumstances, prove loyal to His Majesty the Emperor and be able to help others?

Upon hearing those words, Yuder suddenly realized exactly where they were.

This was the secret passage through which the VIPs had escaped. If the Cavalry had surrounded the area as planned, those exiting would be immediately captured for investigation and punishment.

In this process, the subordinates of Nukijo, including Cyregina, would be faced with two choices.

They could remain loyal to Nukijo until the end, protect the VIPs, and thereby confirm their guilt.

Or they could defect, cooperate with the Cavalry, and pass on information, thereby securing a chance for a reduced sentence.

"…We should ascend as quickly as possible."

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Chapter 683

“…We should ascend as quickly as possible.”

“Indeed. That would be wise.”

Kishiar agreed with Yuder’s words.

However, surprisingly, there was no need to hurry. The ones they were seeking appeared before them on their own.

“I hear the clash of weapons from afar.”

“Could it be…”

Upon seeing Yuder’s expression, Kishiar nodded.

“It seems our exceptional allies have found the secret passage first. We must go before the standoff intensifies. And… Reneve?”

At Kishiar’s call, Reneve, who had been trailing behind, barely lifted her head.

“…Yes?”

“Do you still remember what we asked of you yesterday?”

“Ah…”

Reneve’s expression became subtle.

Yesterday, when they promised to rescue her, Kishiar and Yuder had requested Reneve to perform a few tasks.

The first was to inform those trapped on the third underground level of the situation and then to withdraw her restrained power.

The second was to immediately exert her power upon discovering Nukijo's Awakener subordinate with stealth abilities or if they encountered any other possible Awakener subordinates of Nukijo.

The first task was important, but the second was more crucial. If Nukijo had more Awakener subordinates, no one could counter them as effectively as Reneve.

But it turned out that Nukijo's Awakener subordinate was none other than Cyregina.

"I remember…"

"Good. The time to fulfill the second request seems to be approaching soon. I'll rely on you the moment we encounter those who are fighting."

Kishiar's expression was calm and relaxed, like someone oblivious, but as always with his actions, they harbored meanings too complex for even Yuder to fully surmise.

'Reneve must be tested by bringing up the second request without prior warning about Cyregina's remaining opportunity.'

Reneve bit her lip and nodded.

"Yes."

Yuder, anticipating that Reneve might not be able to exert her full power, firmly placed his hand on the hilt of his sword, ready to intervene at any moment.

But his concerns were unfounded.

As soon as Reneve heard the screams of those battling an invisible attacker, she did not hesitate to unleash her ability.

And now, the worst-case scenario was averted.

Cyregina. While Cyregina had inflicted injuries on some of the Imperial Army and a portion of the Cavalry, there were no serious casualties. In fact, Cyregina's injuries were much more severe.

'It's admirable that they could handle a situation against an unknown Awakener with abilities that they have never seen before without panic, but it's disappointing that they got injured against an Awakener who was almost an amateur.'

Yuder resolved to prepare a much more challenging and intense training regimen for the Cavalry members of the Southern branch. If they had seen the names of the training exercises he was contemplating, they would have immediately collapsed in terror. While these thoughts flashed through his mind, Nathan Zuckerman approached.

He looked back and forth between the blood-covered Yuder wearing Kishiar's cloak and the lord smiling proudly next to him in an outfit showing off his skin, and then silently pulled out a small pouch he had been carrying on his back. Inside, as Kishiar had expected, was another cloak.

"I thought you might bring something like this. Thank you, Nathan."

"Not at all."

As the adjutant, he ought to have advised Kishiar, a noble of imperial lineage and a Duke, to consider his dignity more closely, but Nathan Zuckerman was as composed as his lord. His demeanor revealed a master craftsman's experience, suggesting this wasn't his first time handling such matters.

What had Nathan Zuckerman experienced to possess such preparedness? For the first time, Yuder felt a spark of curiosity, but

given the situation, he remained silent.

Kishiar, draped in a light and elegant cloak, winked at Yuder, then turned to address the Cavalry members who were busily binding the VIPs and Nukijos subordinates.

“Tie them up, and gather as much information and names as possible. We don’t know if any of them will try to escape or swap places once outside, taking advantage of the chaos.”

“Understood!”

“Stop your nonsense! Names, indeed! We will never reveal them to the likes of you!”

As expected, the VIPs protested vehemently. Nukijo’s subordinates, too, remained silent, sealing their lips.

The Cavalry members murmured amongst themselves, frustrated.

“Hmm… A few slaps or hanging them upside down to tickle their feet might loosen their tongues. Would that be too much?”

The VIPs shuddered at this dreadful suggestion, hurling insults.

“You vulgar brutes. I was merely kidnapped! Anyone who dares lay a hand on an innocent will face retribution in the name of my family!”

“Will you take responsibility for your words? I’ll let the world know the Cavalry captures innocents without proper verification!”

“I am innocent. Do you really think the people of Charloin will believe your accusations?”

It was clear to any observer that these individuals were guilty. The idea of Nukijo’s VIPs being innocent victims of kidnapping was

preposterous.

But those present were powerful enough to turn such lies into truth, should there be no witnesses to their actions here. They continued to brazenly claim their innocence, glaring at Nukijo's subordinates who had brought them.

Seeing that they knew how to twist the situation to their advantage, the Cavalry members felt both annoyance and confusion. They had never encountered such brazen behavior, even when arresting nobles involved in illegal auctions in the West. These individuals seemed to have skins as thick as iron.

Kishiar, closely observing, spoke up again.

"So everyone claims to be innocent. Are they truly saying they saw nothing of what transpired here today?"

"Yes, that's right! …Ah!"

A noble, responding arrogantly, suddenly screamed, reeling as if struck. The culprit was, of course, Yuder Aile, standing beside Kishiar.

"Show respect. He is the Commander of the Cavalry."

His voice was slow, emotionless, and cold.

That single sentence had a profound effect. The air around them turned icy, and the bound individuals, sensing their fear, fell silent.

The fact that these individuals still dared such insolence, even after seeing some members called Kishiar Commander," indicated that many still underestimated Duke Kishiar La Orr, the master of the Divine Sword and the Commander of the Cavalry. Despite knowing his achievements, they pretended ignorance, revealing their malicious nature.

Was there any need to tolerate such scoundrels?

‘No. There wasn’t.’

However, Yuder had to apologize to Reneve, who might have momentarily suffered a setback in her ability to suppress due to the power Yuder had unleashed.

“I’m sorry. Are you alright?”

“I’m fine. It was startling when part of it broke suddenly…”

Fortunately, the power Yuder had summoned was minimal, so Reneve was only startled, not injured. Yuder had anticipated this and had moderated his strength accordingly, which was a relief.

‘But a small force doesn’t mean the impact on the recipient is lessened.’

What Yuder had done was to use the power of the wind to hurl a tiny piece of gravel from the ground. Even a small stone, when hurled at high speed, can hurt more than a rock. The VIPs would have learned that lesson well enough by now.

Amid the icy atmosphere, Kishiar couldn’t help but let out an embarrassed laugh.

“Oh dear. Thanks to a capable assistant, there’s no need to raise my voice anymore. I’m truly grateful.”

“…”

“Yes, claims can be freely made, but no matter how much one tries to hide, the truth always emerges. I believe the people who remember best what these ‘amnesiacs’ did are right here, but I wonder if truly no one is willing to speak up.”

“…”

“I’m sure there are those who understand what will benefit their future and won’t forget that it’s ultimately up to them to decide.”

The subordinates of Nukijo weren’t completely oblivious. Realizing Kishiar’s indirect persuasion, some of them twitched nervously. However, one of them yelled out in a rage.

“Anyone who speaks will not be spared! Keep quiet!”

But Kishiar, looking past them at Cyregina, smiled. Cyregina, who had been staring blankly at him, glanced at Reneve and then clenched her teeth, swallowing hard.

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Chapter 684

Cyregina, who had been staring blankly at him, glanced at Reneve and then clenched her teeth, swallowing hard.

“I will speak!”

Yet, before Cyregina could proceed, one of Nukijo’s subordinates, who had been cautiously biding his time, eagerly stepped forward, raising his hand. This sly individual, who had been seeking an escape since hearing of Nukijo’s demise, was undeterred by the fierce glares and veiled threats from the VIPs and fellow comrades, and asked in a nervous tone, “Is it enough to confirm that everyone here is a guest of Nukijo?”

“Merely confirming that is somewhat insufficient,” replied Kishiar, who desired the names and information of the VIPs.

Hearing this, the man quickly rattled off a few names. However, these lacked the most crucial element: the surnames of prominent families, and he failed to accurately identify the individuals he named.

“You lie to save your own skin, spouting nonsense names! Where are these fictitious people you speak of?” berated one of the VIPs.

“I… I may be slightly mistaken, but I’ve told you all I know! Isn’t that enough?” the man stammered, his words clearly falling short of being helpful. They were mere utterances, far from constituting evidence.

However, Kishiar, with an inscrutable smile, gestured to the Cavalry members, issuing an order, “Release this man from his bonds.”

“What? Ah… Yes, understood,” they complied, though clearly puzzled by their leader’s command. The special forces of the empire, watching from a step behind, also wore expressions of concern.

Contrastingly, the freed subordinate of Nukijo, massaging his sore arms, smirked, his eyes betraying thoughts of escape.

This stirred noticeable unrest among Nukijo’s other subordinates, who had been warily eyeing each other. Gradually, they began to speak.

“I think I remember one name…”

“Me too…”

“Silence, you fools!” another shouted, attempting to quell them, but to no avail. They began calling out names they remembered, yet these were as muddled as the first.

Kishiar, unshaken by the chaotic shouts, asked with a smile, “Is that all?”

Silence fell.

“Not one of you correctly matched a name with a family. A pity. There could have been significant leniency for anyone able to do so.”

Again, silence.

“Truly, no more?”

“…I know them all,” a faint voice broke the stillness. All eyes turned to Cyregina.

“Hmm, do you? Let’s hear it,” said Kishiar, seemingly without great expectation.

Cyregina slowly turned her head, scanning the faces of each guest. Starting from the one at the far left, she pointed and began to name each. “The guest in the green attire is Coles from the Salmaka family, the second child. Next to him is Eneska from the Abkachia family, the fifth child. And beside them is…”

The previously boisterous VIPs’ complexions drastically changed, their surprised and dismayed expressions revealing Cyregina’s correctness.

‘How could she possibly…?’

“It’s all lies!”

“How dare someone like you utter my name…!” they exclaimed in disbelief.

Someone shouted, but their cry was empty, lacking force. Cyregina remained indifferent to the curses hurled at her. Unperturbed by the uproar, she successfully recited the name of every last person. Astonishingly, the information she provided included not just names and families but also the order and positions in which they had arrived and seated themselves at the arena that day.

“That is all,” she concluded, and a prolonged silence followed her words.

The first to break the silence was Kishiar, his expression as calm as when others had chaotically spat out random names. “Truly detailed and accurate information. It doesn’t feel like something made up. I can understand recalling the names, but how did you remember the rest so precisely?”

“I have been working here since the very inception of the Awakeners’ arena under Nukijo, the owner of this place. Nukijo always entrusted me with guarding and entertaining the VIPs in the

VIP section, and ordered me to eavesdrop on their conversations for any useful information. With ears, one naturally ends up memorizing such things.”

“What did you say?”

“How dare he!”

Exclamations of dismay erupted from various quarters. But with Nukijo dead, there was no one present to bear the brunt of these accusations.

“Useful information collected by Nukijo, you say? An unexpected harvest. Are you willing to share more? Of course, the Cavalry will compensate accordingly, based on the accuracy and usefulness of the information.”

Cyregina’s eyes flickered slightly. She closed them tightly and then opened them again, her expression completely transformed.

“Of course. If a noble person like yourself wishes, I will reveal all that I know. I assure you, no one knows they dirty secrets and what they sought to hide better than I do.”

With these grave words, Cyregina knelt and bowed deeply.

“Traitor!”

Curses followed from behind her, but they had no effect on her or the Cavalry.

‘This will surely secure a reduction in my sentence.’

It was, in hindsight, obvious that Cyregina would know so much about the VIPs. Who else but Nukijo would use an Awakener, capable of remaining unseen, to gather such information?

Yet, it would have been difficult to extract this information so dramatically and conclusively, and turn it into a sure deal for leniency, had it not been for Kishiar.

‘Perhaps… he had guessed this outcome from the moment he heard that an Awakener with invisibility skills was tasked with protecting the VIPs.’

Yuder, finally easing his mind, turned his head. His gaze found Reneve, who was covering her face, her shoulders shaking.

‘Many repeat their crimes even after serving their sentence. It’s true that punishment alone does not reform. But… perhaps these individuals will be different.’

With a smile, Kishiar then commanded everyone to head outside.

“Once we leave, transport everyone to the southern branch of the Cavalry for investigation. It will be tiring for all, but I must ask this of you.”

“Understood!”

“What? Taken to the Cavalry? You said you’d release us for giving information!”

A recently unbound subordinate of Nukijo protested loudly.

“Well. I said to release the bonds, not that there wouldn’t be an investigation.”

“What…!”

Stunned, the subordinate could not continue his protest. His inability to retort with curses was due to Yuder, standing right next to Kishiar, flashing a cold glare.

The VIPs, too, were reluctant to be taken away, but they became remarkably docile after making eye contact with Yuder.

As they finally emerged from the collapsed hole into the outside world, passing the Black Orca Tavern, a handful of Cavalry members guarding the perimeter cheered. Piled up like a mountain beside them were the subordinates of Nukijo.

“Commander! Yuder! You’re all safe! Of course, I expected nothing less!”

Elpkins, who had been protected among them, wrapped in a mantle, rushed over in a flurry.

“You’ve returned safely! I, I’ve applied to join the Cavalry!”

“Is that so.”

His face, tear-streaked from emotion, looked somewhat comical, but Yuder did not laugh.

“Then we shall soon see you in the Cavalry.”

“Yes! I’m truly truly grateful!”

As the crowd gathered around to watch, the bound individuals were either dragged or carried off in a line. No matter how much the VIPs raged or bowed their heads to hide their faces, the Cavalry members treated them no differently than Nukijo’s subordinates. Amidst the screams and shouts, only Cyregina moved silently and calmly, maintaining her composure.

Thus, the long day ended for the Cavalry Commander and his assistant after arriving at the southern branch.

And naturally, this news quickly spread to the capital and across the Empire, shocking many.

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Chapter 685

“Is it true that Duke Peletta is currently in Charloin? Moreover, he demolished an illegal betting fight club and arrested several nobles’ sons who were habitual gamblers? What is this all about?”

To this inquiry of Crown Prince Katchian, his attendant bowed deeply.

“Exactly as I’ve reported, Your Highness. Duke Peletta went there incognito to personally oversee the recruitment of the Cavalry. It was during this time that the incident occurred.”

“I’m pointing out your dullness in failing to notice a person, who I thought was within the Cavalry Headquarters, moving all the way there! If I’m to remain ignorant of such covert operations, what use do I have for you as my eyes and ears?”

Prince Katchian’s face flared with anger, prompting the attendant to quickly bow and apologize.

“I am deeply sorry. But Duke Peletta moved with minimal personnel and disguised himself. Even the locals of the south only recognized him after the event unfolded. Even Duke Diarca was unaware of Duke Peletta’s visit there…”

“Are you suggesting it’s normal for me to be unaware if Duke Diarca is?”

“No, Your Highness, that was not my intention. I meant to imply that the Cavalry moved with such secrecy that…”

“Save your excuses. It seems you have another master to serve. Leave now!”

The Crown Prince crumpled a letter on the table and threw it. The attendant, murmuring an apology, hastily retreated, picking up the crumpled paper and backing out of the room. As he exited, the sound of something breaking came from within the Crown Prince's room.

Shuddering at the thought that it could have been his own head, the attendant was approached by another who whispered secretly.

"You should've been more cautious when discussing Duke Peletta or the Cavalry. After the recent event where he attended the family dinner with only Duke Diarca, he's become quite sensitive."

"I was careful, but look at the result. I thought his relationship with Duke Diarca had improved while he focused on the investigation of the intruder in the Sun Palace, but he seemed even more enraged at the mention of Duke Diarca."

"Perhaps it's not just about Duke Diarca. You weren't here this morning, but the Emperor sent an urgent letter regarding the Sun Palace intrusion investigation."

"Ah… Is this crumpled paper the one?"

Still holding the crumpled paper, the attendant sighed.

"His Highness the Duke must be quite concerned. Hes been assisting His Highness the Crown Prince in capturing the Sun Palace intruder, hasn't he?"

"Indeed, it's his efforts that matter. Wasn't he the one who sent the healer?"

"Where else could one find such a noble person…"

Despite being the Crown Prince's attendant, his comments leaned more towards Duke Diarca, justifying the Crown Prince's

anger.

The noise from the Crown Prince’s room eventually subsided after a while. An attendant muttered.

“If only those healers were quick to sense and come at such times! They are always away when needed.”

“Indeed. If they came to treat His Highness, why do they wander so much? Lately, they are hardly seen around.”

I heard that they went to inspect the new accommodations they had acquired. There are rumors that since they could not completely heal the Crown Prince’s deep-seated illness, they might be looking for an opportunity to flee.”

“Surely not. Such an act would trouble Baron Renbow, the overseer of those men”

At that moment, the subject of the attendants’ conversation, Baron Renbow, was at the residence of Duke Diarca.

Duke Diarca, with a tobacco pipe in his mouth that clouded his mind, smiled and began to speak.

“That fox-like Awakener who called himself sage promised to mess up the recruitment of the Cavalry. I wonder what he actually did. Did he know that Duke Peletta was in the south?”

“That is”

Baron Renbow, sweating profusely from his back, trailed off. What could he possibly say in this situation? He and the sage had planned to infiltrate spies into the new recruits of the Cavalry and report back. However, their initial attempt to plant people in the west had failed miserably when Yuder Aile appeared like a ghost, weeding out all their spies and rejecting them. The mercenaries sent for

revenge merely took the money and disappeared, having escaped so effectively that not even a trace of them was left.

Yet, the real plan was to be executed in the south, and it seemed fine until Duke Peletta suddenly appeared there, destroying an illegal Awakener fighting ring and earning the adulation of the Empire's citizens.

Despite these circumstances, the sage was strangely unresponsive, making it impossible to share information with the Awakeners they intended to infiltrate into the south, leaving their plans in disarray.

'Had I only known this, I would not be at such a loss for words here'

Even now, if the sage had been by his side, Baron Renbow wouldn't have had to endure this pressure alone before Duke Diarca. However, the sage had suddenly left on some important business today, leaving Renbow to come here alone.

Had he not trusted the sage deeply, he might have suspected him of abandoning Renbow to escape on his own.

"I need not hear it to know the answer."

Duke Diarca exhaled a deep puff of smoke. Baron Renbow barely managed to suppress a cough and began to speak.

"Cough, cough, ahem. I am deeply sorry for causing you concern. However, we have not been unprepared. The sage assured me that he knows many in the south and confidently promised to plant people there who would become your men, Duke. The recruitment for the Cavalry is not yet over, so please watch a little longer."

"Indeed. Your task was only that part, not to predict and prevent the mishaps caused by Duke Peletta. Of course, had you been

properly prepared, I suppose you wouldn’t have missed such movements”

It’s foolish to only focus on one task when entrusted with many. Duke Diarca’s laugh, filled with thinly veiled scorn, was apparent in his attitude, suggesting he didn’t expect much from them if they couldn’t even properly gather information about Duke Peletta’s movement to the south. Baron Renbow’s hands trembled slightly with shame under his cold laughter.

“Renbow, as you said, the recruitment for the Cavalry is not yet over. Let’s see what results it brings. As for me, I have no knowledge of your actions and merely await the outcome.”

The underlying meaning of his words was clear: should Renbow and the sage’s plot fail, Duke Diarca’s side would claim total ignorance of the affair’s proceedings.

…Yes, thank you.

By the way, how fares His Highness the Crown Prince? Is his recovery progressing well?

Ah… Yes, of course. I have heard that recently, he has had no issues with either meals or sleep. His Highness is also diligently carrying out the investigation of the intrusion into the Sun Palace, aided as he is by Duke Diarca’s assistance

Ah, speaking of which. Did you know? Today, a bouquet of flowers was sent to me from the Sun Palace.

Caught off guard by this sudden revelation, Renbow wore a look of bewilderment.

Is that so?

Yes. It was a bouquet of Macarea flowers, bestowed as a mark of appreciation for dedicated service.

Only then did Renbow notice a previously unseen, unfamiliar vase placed where Duke Diarca's gaze lingered. The luxurious glass vase, faintly adorned with the emblem of the Sun Palace used by the Emperor, contained vibrant Macarea flowers. Duke Diarca, with a cold gaze, murmured,

Sending this to me instead of the Crown Prince's Palace, the meaning is clear. His Majesty knows I am the one truly at work, a subtle command to remain compliant.

Silence fell, a bold, yet elegantly veiled provocation, all the more poignant as an accolade from the Emperor could not be casually discarded.

Renbow recalled the youthful face of the Emperor, briefly seen at a recent celebration of the Cavalrys victory. Until his recent retreat due to illness, the Emperor had been aggressively implementing policies to strengthen imperial power and suppress the nobles, engaging in such provocations with the leaders of the four great ducal houses. It felt as if those days had returned.

Does one become fearless facing death, or was there another reason for such actions?

Is the rumor of His Majestys critical illness true or false? Its quite perplexing, isnt it?

Duke Diarca echoed Renbow's thoughts exactly.

It was a secretive conversation, unheard by others. Yet sometimes, even inanimate objects seem to have ears, capturing the words of men.

From the crumpled letter in the hands of the attendants and the Macarea flowers in front of Duke Diarca, a faint, unseen haze seemed to swirl, as if by some unspoken agreement. Meanwhile, far from the Bright Palace where the Crown Prince resided, Emperor Keilusa, sitting in front of his desk in the Sun Palace, abruptly opened his eyes.

Huh.

Your lips are dry, Your Majesty. I will refill your tea.

The loyal, aged head attendant meticulously poured tea into the Emperor's cup. After sipping the tea, Emperor Keilusa finally spoke, his eyes clear and resolute.

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Chapter 686

Your lips are dry, Your Majesty. I will refill your tea.

The loyal, aged head attendant meticulously poured tea into the Emperor's cup. After sipping the tea, Emperor Keilusa finally spoke, his eyes clear and resolute.

"The reactions are largely as expected. The confusion over Duke Peletta's journey to the south and their attempts to discern our movements."

"Is that so? That's fortunate."

"Duke Diarca plans to use Baron Renbow and the Crown Prince's healers to mess with the Cavalry recruitment. I must send a letter to Kishiar."

"Though Kishiar might already suspect, more detailed information is always better."

The head attendant smiled kindly.

"Yes. And, naturally, despite receiving flowers, Duke Diarca seems not to withdraw from the Sun Palace's intruder investigation. That's good for us. We'll prepare for their proposed suspects while subtly informing the Crown Prince about the real culprit. And we should plant something in Baron Renbow's house to monitor the situation closely…"

Emperor Keilusa's lips flowed with plans for the future. Observing his calm yet decisive manner of organizing tasks, the head attendant internally swallowed his joy and admiration.

No matter how many times he saw it, the Emperor's healthy, undisturbed dedication to work made the attendant's decades of palace experience seem trivial, often leaving him choked with emotion.

'I never thought I would see him like this again.'

Emperor Keilusa had miraculously returned from death's door. Now, he no longer groaned in pain.

It was all because he had become an Awakener. Since his awakening, he slept well and finished his meals. The palace cook, as loyal as the attendant, still cried when collecting the Emperor's empty plates.

Of course, the aftermath of his near-death experience didn't vanish magically. His body was still frail, and his strength weak, but the servant did not worry.

"Hmm… Has it gotten this late already?"

Glancing at the clock in his office, the Emperor removed his glasses and massaged his temples, easing the fatigue in his eyes.

"It's time for training. I should change."

"Yes, Your Majesty. I will assist you."

The biggest change since the Emperor became an Awakener was this 'training'.

Previously, Emperor Keilusa had little fondness for physical exercise. As a young Crown Prince, he preferred reading or discussing with scholars over dedicating time to horsemanship or swordsmanship.

Even after becoming Emperor, this preference remained unchanged, with minimal exercise for fitness and occasional walks with the Empress.

But now, things were different. The Emperor changed into simple clothes and trained alone in a secluded space, away from prying eyes. This training, meant to control the power of an Awakener, was not just sitting still.

Even the head attendant, watching from a distance, was sometimes surprised by the intensity of the physical exercises, the first step in the training.

‘Baron Aile, who taught His Majesty, said that without controlling the body, one cannot control power.’

The Emperor patiently followed the training regimen given by his young teacher, Yuder Aile, before his departure. There were times when the exercises were so strenuous he felt like dying, but that was not a sign of trouble, just a lack of stamina, as his young teacher had coldly pointed out.

If you desire to wield your power more effectively, you must be prepared to pay the price. People are willing to sacrifice something as precious as their own lives to gain immense power, yet strangely, they are reluctant to invest the safer, always available commodities of effort and time. But I assure you, the latter offers far greater rewards at a far lesser cost.

Yuder Aile spoke calmly, advising against impatience for immediate results.

His words seemed to come from someone who had lived for decades, and they were undeniably true.

During the training, the Emperor was drenched in sweat. He used to dislike this sensation, but now it was different.

Thinking that this sweat was the price for the strength to never lose his beloved again, he wouldn't mind sweating ten times more than he currently did.

"You have sweated profusely. The bathwater is prepared, Your Majesty, please proceed."

After the training, the exhausted Emperor, lying on the ground, struggled to rise upon hearing the head attendant's words. Once he would have needed support, but after his awakening, he always tried to rise on his own.

"There was a message from the Dawn Palace during your training, Your Majesty."

"The Empress? Is it about the walk after dinner?"

"That as well, but it seems there's a pressing matter concerning Herne."

"Herne?"

"Please see this, Your Majesty. It's a letter from the Empress."

The Emperor, soaking in the bath, dried his hands to read the short letter from the Empress. His lowered red eyes soon finished reading and turned back to the head attendant.

"I see. Trouble in Charloin, and naturally, Herne reacts. Duke Herne, recuperating at the southern villa, expressed significant displeasure over this matter."

"I should inform the Cavalry."

"The Empress said that the First Princess of Herne, who conveyed this news, had already gone there."

"Ah, if it's her…"

“Yes.”

The Emperor nodded slightly, handing back the letter with a faint smile.

“Perhaps this incident might draw out the fox hiding in its den for years. Well… I trust Kishiar to handle that well. I should focus on matters here, ensuring my brother has nothing to worry about.”

Even at that moment, the Emperor was receiving voices of many through the items and agents he had secretly planted.

Secret conspiracies. Conversations thought to be unheard. Information leaking without knowledge.

The Emperor committed all these to memory, knowing they would one day become his weapons.

Finishing his bath, he gave a new order to the head attendant.

“Speaking of which, I heard the Crown Prince’s healers have been venturing out frequently. After Kishiar announced the list of Cavalry collaborators, he said they would reveal themselves in time. It might be now. Ensure the Cavalry is handling it without any lapse.”

“Understood, Your Majesty.”

The head attendant bowed deeply.

—

“Diemon. What’s wrong?”

“Oh, nothing… It’s just that I feel like someone is following us…”

At the time the Emperor issued his order, the five Awakeners following the Sage were outside together for the first time in a long

while. Dressed as pilgrims, they followed the Sage unhesitatingly, whispering among themselves.

“Foolish indeed. Did you forget that Nezo, with his abilities, confirmed there were no suspicious people around before we left? Don’t look around suspiciously for no reason. What if those with Nahan see you? What do you think they’ll think?”

Langbarton chided Diemon, who possessed the ability to copy abilities, causing him to furrow his brow.

“But Nezo can’t see everything, can he? And even if the brothers that follow Nahan see us… So what?”

“So what? Are you saying that what you’re doing right now is right?”

Langbarton retorted, shocked, as the Sage glanced back at them. The two immediately fell silent, though Langbarton didn’t hide his suppressed anger.

‘Diemon, this foolish boy. Ever since he accompanied the Sage alone some time ago, he’s been increasingly arrogant. Today, he’s completely overstepping. He doesnt even know how dangerous a time this is for someone who can only copy other peoples abilities!’

Their risky outing today was due to the recently published list of collaborators with the Cavalry. After the shocking incident where the Star of Nagran was mentioned among the collaborators, the Sage had put aside most other matters and was making efforts to find Nahan, suspected to be somewhere in the capital. This task had to be handled secretly, only among those who knew what the Star of Nagran was, making it difficult to seek help from people like Baron Renbow.

Navigating the capital, unfamiliar and without much help, was challenging. They had to move without attracting attention, but

surprisingly, it was the Sage who provided significant assistance in this endeavor.

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“I am acquainted with some here who can provide aid,” the Sage had revealed.

It was a startling realization that the Sage, too, had a time before awakening, and hence, acquaintances within the capital. The young Awakeners, including Langbarton, had never considered that the Sage might have lived in the capital prior to his awakening.

Yet, that was all they knew; the Sage’s exact identity and past remained shrouded in mystery, a detail they neither knew nor particularly sought to uncover.

Soon after, the Sage informed them of sightings in the capital of individuals resembling Nahan’s comrades, and a wall marked with a signal exclusive to the Star of Nagran was discovered nearby.

“Nahan was searching for us… for the Sage as well,” they realized.

Debate ensued over the trustworthiness of this information and whether it was a trap to capture the Sage. In the end, it was the Sage who volunteered to sacrifice himself.

“This man cares little for his own life. I simply wish to prevent Nahan from leading his brethren and all of the Star of Nagran into danger.”

This declaration stirred respect and admiration among the young Awakeners. Langbarton was moved to near tears and renewed his vow to protect the Sage at all costs.

Thus, they left a new signal near the one left by Nahan’s group.

Almost immediately, a response came from Nahan’s side.

After several exchanges, they secretly agreed to meet at a new hideout, the date being today.

“There it is.”

Tension mounted as they approached the new hideout. After learning of Nahan’s infiltration, they had moved to this location, unfamiliar to most of them.

In the past, meeting comrades would have been a joyous occasion, but now, they couldn’t shake off their anxiety.

We planned to arrive at the hideout first to confront them, but what if one of them has already snuck in there? It’s unlikely, but… no, even if so, I don’t believe we’d lose. Still… Damn! Diemon’s nonsense is making me worry unnecessarily.

Nahan had caused much disruption, fracturing the relationships among their southern base comrades and allowing a suspicious group to infiltrate.

Langbarton knew he could never forgive them if they threatened the Sage.

The Sage is too kind, always offering chances even to the likes of Nahan. But not me. That creature is the evil of our group. Even if not today, it must be eradicated.

Initially, Langbarton hadn’t felt so strongly, but over time, he and the other young Awakeners had grown increasingly wary and resentful of Nahan.

Unaware of the oddity of his feelings or that Diemon’s premonition might not be entirely wrong, Langbarton took a deep breath. He looked around, half-expecting to find suspicious

onlookers or enemies, but saw only ordinary passersby. After hearing a loud vendor hawking dried fruits outside a nearby fruit shop, Langbarton quietly entered the hideout.

Ha, if it weren't for the pharmacist, we would've continued searching elsewhere, oblivious to their arrival here today.

Beyond the lodgings where the Sage and the young Awakeners had entered, Devran Hartude, who had just been energetically attracting customers at the fruit store watched by Langbarton, set down the jar of dried apple preserves he had been holding.

In front of him stood Enon, pressing down his hat, appearing like a customer pondering whether to make a purchase.

Their presence there was not without reason. It was because Enon had brought news that 'Karl Enfile', an official who had vanished from the capital long ago, had suddenly reappeared.

Karl Enfile was a name presumed to belong to the Sage leading the Star of Nagran, before he became an Awakener. Having revealed himself after several years, he sought certain information from those he knew in the past, then departed once he received responses.

The information he sought pertained to the whereabouts of a suspicious and dangerous group roaming the capital, including a man bearing extensive burn scars on one side of his face.

The Sage began searching for the location of Nahan.

Having heard the tale from his trusted sources, Enon was certain of this.

Ideally, this news would have been first reported to Yuder, but he was in the south at the moment. Therefore, following the intelligence instructions Yuder had left before his departure, the remaining

intelligence members gathered to collaborate upon hearing the news.

Enon had discovered more. He knew the location of a mysterious sentence someone had suddenly painted on a wall somewhere in the capital. Its meaning was difficult to grasp for those not affiliated with the Star of Nagran, but the Cavalry had Kanna, who could discern a wealth of information with a mere touch, and a few former Awakeners from the Star of Nagran.

“This was left on a day when dawn brought a light rain. So, three days ago. The one who painted this was engulfed in immense anxiety, vigilance, and suspicion. The meaning seems to indicate a rendezvous. Hmm. Are the Sage and Nahan planning to meet? The exact date isn’t clear, but it might be best to ask Gayle and Doyle.”

Following Kanna’s advice, Gayle and Doyle, greeted with innocent faces by the intelligence members, joyfully examined the drawing presented to them.

“Oh, this drawing…! I’ve learned about it! The circles and sticks here indicate the number of days until the event, so five days! The sun symbol next to it means daytime. And below that is…”

According to what the brothers revealed, the Sage and Nahan were scheduled to meet today, right here.

And Devran, one of the intelligence members, realized that one of the stores where he had taken a job undercover for intelligence gathering was nearby, devising an excellent use for it.

“How fortunate that I’ve worked at this store. With winter approaching and less work, the owner had gone elsewhere, leaving the place deserted.”

“Right. You were so dedicated to your side job that we thought you were about to quit the Cavalry. Who would have thought it’d

come in handy here! We were really surprised.”

“Yeah, tell me about it.”

Behind Devran, who was boasting, Hinn and Finn, small enough to easily hide behind the stacked fruit boxes, suddenly stood up and teased him.

“Gakane! How’s it over there? Can you manage?”

In contrast to the Eldore siblings, who were petite, Gakane, with his tall stature and strikingly handsome appearance, had no place to hide and was tucked away in a very small storeroom at the corner of the fruit store. He cracked the door open slightly and smiled sheepishly, his eyebrows softening. His clothes were covered in dust from how tightly he had squeezed himself in.

“Uh, I can manage. I’m alright.”

Gakane could have hidden in the shadows for a brief respite, but this was an indefinite wait, preventing him from unnecessarily draining his strength. He enviously watched Enon, who, with a nonchalant face, intently gazed at the pickled lemons.

‘Even the pharmacist is remarkably good-looking… Oddly, he doesn’t seem to catch anyone’s eye. Could that be some sort of trick or ability? I wish I could do the same.’

“Right. It’s tough, but since Nahan hasn’t arrived yet, just hold on a bit longer.”

While the Eldore siblings were comforting Gakane, Enon, who had been silent until then, suddenly turned his head toward a certain direction.

“It looks like they’re coming from over there.”

“Where?”

Instead of answering, Enon gestured with his eyes. From not too far away, individuals with an unmistakably unusual aura emerged from an alley.

Recognizing the scar on the face of the man in the center, the Eldore siblings quickly ducked back behind the boxes. Gakane also vanished like the wind.

Devran, concealing his sharp gaze, resumed attracting customers with a smiling face.

“Oh, don’t hesitate, take a jar with you. You know how staying indoors during winter can damage your skin and weaken your body? But eating these dried apple peel preserves regularly can prevent that. I’m not just trying to sell this, your complexion doesn’t look good.”

His earnest and unpretentious expression and voice somehow lent credibility to his words, even though they were the same as any other vendor. This knack for making his wares seem worth a try revealed why he was a favorite among the merchants.

Wow, Devran. Maybe you should have been a trader?

Indeed.

As the Eldore siblings murmured among themselves, Nahan and his companions nonchalantly passed the fruit store.

Or so they intended.

“Really? Are these apple peel preserves that good? How much?”

Ironically, Devran’s effective sales pitch caused one of Nahan’s followers to stop in his tracks. Fortunately, the others passed by

without pause, but Devran could feel the sweat running down his back.

Worried that Nahan might recognize him from the time he was trapped in the East, he had smeared his face with more soot than usual and even pressed down his hat, but it was hard to relax.

‘Damn it. Should’ve just kept walking!’

“Yes, sir. Just three coins.”

Long accustomed to shop work, his mouth and mind operated splendidly independently.

“Three? Seems a bit expensive…”

“It’s because of the good quality jar. You can reuse it for something else.”

“Hmm…”

“Pepp! What are you doing there? Hurry up!”

While the man hesitated, one of Nahan’s companions called out from a short distance.

“I’ll be right there!… Give me one of those.”

Devran quickly handed over the apple preserves. As he did, Nahan, who had been standing still as if waiting for the man, smoothly turned his head.

They first knocked on the door of a brick house where the Sage’s group had entered. Shortly after, the door opened, and everyone went inside.

“Phew!”

“Well done, Devran.”

As Devran let out a deep sigh, his colleagues emerged from their hiding spots and praised him.

“I’m really curious about what those guys will talk about in there.”

“How long should we wait before going in?”

As the Eldore siblings flashed dangerously twinkling eyes and smiled, Gakane calmly responded.

“Let’s wait until Devran finishes tidying up and then approach.”

However, they didn’t get the chance to make their move. Just as Devran had finished organizing his makeshift shop and removed his apron, a loud explosion erupted from the house.

“Aaagh!”

As people screamed and ran, the intelligence members exchanged glances.

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A chorus of screams echoed as people fled in terror, their paths crisscrossing with the watchful eyes of the intelligence members.

It was Gakane Bolunwald who stepped forward first, breaking the silence. “There’s no need to wait any longer,” he declared firmly. “Hinn and Finn, assist the pharmacist and help evacuate the people. The city guards or knights will soon arrive, drawn by the commotion. Remember, those within are all Awakeners it’s our responsibility. We must immediately contact the Cavalry and His Majesty the Emperor.”

In the past, the Eldore siblings would have protested, preferring the thrill of battle over the task of leading others to safety. But their separate experiences in the West had taught these sarcastic jesters the true value of their abilities and the importance of teamwork.

The siblings’ power to teleport objects, even people, was invaluable in emergencies. Their extraordinary strength, while excellent in combat, shone equally in rescue efforts.

Although they might only begrudgingly admit it, Gakane Bolunwald was undeniably reliable in crises. Having led his companions through the perilous Great Sarain Forest, he had taken on the most challenging tasks, displaying his tenacity even in the face of death. His perseverance remained unaltered despite near-fatal encounters.

The Eldore siblings found Gakane somewhat pitiable yet admirable. He never sought an easy life despite his appealing appearance, earning their respect and perhaps that of Devran as well.

‘Though Devran was once a proud and ambitious man, eager to take the lead. Seeing this, it’s clear why Yuder wanted Gakane in the

intelligence service first,' they mused.

"Alright. We'll do it," the Eldore siblings agreed without hesitation, prompting a brief, relieved smile from Gakane.

"Thank you. Then Devran, come with me!"

"Understood. Let's go!" Devran quickly followed Gakane.

"Pharmacist, we're off too!"

"But how will we inform the Cavalry? It's too far for a note, even with our powers."

"Don't worry about that. I'll handle it," Enon replied casually, eyes on the smoke billowing rooftops.

"How so?"

"I'll just grab someone nearby. There's bound to be someone around here who can deliver a message."

And Enon did just that. Spotting a fleeing errand boy from a nearby shop, he beckoned him over. The young man, recognizing Enon even in his flight, readily agreed to deliver a message to the Cavalry in the Seventh Wall District. He even took a moment to exchange pleasantries, delighted to see Enon after so long.

"Aren't you going to flee, Enon? What are you still doing here?"

"You haven't heard? I closed the pharmacy and joined the Cavalry as their medic."

"Really? I've been too busy lately to keep up… Do they pay well?"

"They pay well, but the work is relentless. Why, thinking of joining?"

The young man paused, momentarily forgetting the chaos around him, lost in thought. “It’s tempting, but I’m not sure about the workload. I’ll think about it. Anyway, I’ll be off then!”

“Alright. If you can’t go straight away, just grab anyone from the colleague and pass the message on. It needs to be delivered as quickly as possible.”

“Don’t worry. If it were a higher district, maybe, but I know a shortcut to Seventh Wall District. I’ll be there in no time!”

With a sly grin, the young errand boy vanished swiftly. The Eldore siblings, having delegated a task, looked up at Enon with a mix of awe and curiosity.

“Pharmacist, what did you use to do? You have an impressive network.”

Enon shrugged off their amazement. “Like you heard, I’ve just been selling medicines here for a long time. It’s nothing extraordinary.”

“How can it not be? Just selling medicines for a while doesn’t grant everyone the speed of information exchange like this. Yuder wouldn’t have recruited you into the intelligence service for that alone!”

“Who are the colleagues? People from an intelligence guild or something?”

“Wow. Normally, contacting such groups is no simple task. If that’s true, could you be an intelligence guild heavyweight disguised as a pharmacist…?”

“Hmm! It’s possible.”

The rascals' eyes sparkled with curiosity, but Enon remained unresponsive. Instead, he pointed towards a nearby fallen individual and gestured with his head.

"Instead of wasting time with pointless chatter, why don't you go and help that person over there?"

The Eldore siblings' attempt to probe further into Enon's identity was swiftly thwarted. Grumbling under their breath, they quickly set to work, calming the panicked crowd and moving them to safety.

Enon continued to gaze intently at a brick house from which unsettling noises emanated. Though he appeared to be doing nothing, his eyes were busily scanning the surroundings.

'It's been a while since I've seen such strong energies converging and churning within the capital. The malevolence emanating is too intense. Fortunately, the response has been swift enough that I don't need to intervene defensively, but considering that such incidents might increase…'

Lost in thought, Enon let out a long sigh.

'Right now, it's just this, but what about the times I don't know about?'

'That time' referred to an era Enon could only guess at, a past and a future that existed only for Yuder Aile, who was not present in the capital.

Since coming to believe that Yuder Aile hailed from the future, Enon often pondered those times. Yuder's reticence to speak in detail suggested a tumultuous past. The mere hint that Enon himself had been absent was enough to conjure numerous dreadful possibilities.

But what about now? All the measures Yuder had prepared before his departure were currently safeguarding the capital.

Enon turned his gaze southward. Beyond the clear sky, he knew, was where Yuder currently resided.

‘Always causing headaches. He leaves all these bothersome tasks! If he returns even slightly more injured than when he left, I won’t let him off easy!’

Yuder, feeling an odd chill, turned his head towards the source. All he saw to the north were birds flying leisurely outside the open window of the southern branch.

“What’s the matter, Yuder? Is there someone there? Perhaps a bold fan climbed the wall to catch a glimpse of the western hero?”

“Hardly likely. Seems the window has been open for too long. It’s getting a bit chilly; I’ll close it.”

Keenly perceptive, Kishiar noticed Yuder’s reaction almost instantly and asked in a playful tone. Yuder shook his head and closed the window.

“Even in the south, winter is winter. We must be cautious. Come over here.”

After a tumultuous day, the southern branch was busier than ever. It was teeming with visitors to the point of overcrowding. While interrogating those they had apprehended, the members of the southern branch, overwhelmed by countless protestors, barely had time to breathe. Yet, for Kishiar and Yuder, a brief respite was granted.

The man who had called Yuder over seated him in a plush chair and leaned against his shoulder. Yuder, wordlessly, used the power of the wind to toss a magic stone toward the magic-stone stove

nearby. Multicolored flames burst forth, intensifying the crackling sound.

“Most of those we rescued yesterday expressed a desire to join the Cavalry,” he noted. “Some wish to return to their hometowns, and we plan to support them in that.”

“That’s good to hear. It seems right to grant their wishes.”

“Indeed. We shall proceed with that. As for Cyregina…”

Just then, a knocking sound interrupted them.

“Commander, a guest has arrived.”

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“Commander, a guest has arrived.”

‘A guest? Who could it be?’

This was right after the literal destruction of the betting arena. Those who would visit had already frequented the soutHerne branch of the Cavalry, marking their presence.

Among them were prominent figures: the head of Charloin’s security, the haughty servant sent by the Lord of Charloin, those who protested for the release of gamblers caught on-site. Especially noisy were the representatives from the families of these VIPs. Countless others had knocked, seeking an audience with Commander Kishiar La Orr, who had suddenly appeared.

However, most were turned away under the pretext that the Commander was ‘exhausted after a big task’. It was frustrating, but what could be done? They couldn’t afford to offend him, especially when their weaknesses were now in his grasp.

This tactic had been effectively used by Kishiar previously at the illegal auction in Tainu in the West, quieting the protesting nobles. It seemed even more effective now.

‘I guess they saw what happened to Baron Willhem of Tainu. One wrong move and they could end up utterly destroyed, just like him.’

Baron Willhem, once the lord of Tainu, had faced utter ruin. Despite his long service to the Duke of Tainu, he was abandoned in his most desperate hour.

Yuder knew that Willhem had been stripped of his title, noble rights, and his properties confiscated. He faced 15 years of

imprisonment, 30 years of forced labor, and a fine of three million gold coins.

With no other way to reduce his sentence, Willhem turned to implicate others, including his brother, family, surrounding nobles, and the Duke of Tain.

Such actions were disgraceful for most nobles, but Willhem was cunningly persuaded by the first and second children of Tain, Pruelle and Priscilla.

‘They’ll promise a lighter sentence and his family’s safety in exchange for a definitive end to their father. Not a bad strategy. Beneficial for both Tain and the Emperor, as well as us.’

Despite his vile life, Willhem hoped for his daughters’ safety. Hence, their trial was still ongoing.

Initially, the entire nation was abuzz with a noble Duke, one of the four ducal families, being on trial before a judge. However, as the situation evolved, it was perceived as an internal power struggle within the Tain family.

If the Emperor and the Cavalry were seen attacking the Tain family, the nobility would resist. But if it seemed like an internal dispute gone awry, the story changed.

The longer the trial dragged on, the more the public would lose interest. This would give Priscilla, the heir, time to solidify her support. When the time was right, the Duke of Tain would face severe punishment without anyone to defend him.

This was the outcome of a political agreement between Pruelle, Priscilla, Emperor Keilusa, and Commander Kishiar. The trial might take months or years, but the wait was worth ensuring their victory.

But ordinary nobles would not know so much.

In the minds of the nobles of Charloin, only Baron Willhem, who had met his downfall at the hands of the Cavalry, would have left a lasting impression.

So, the more they have to hide, the more likely they are to turn back when they hear from Kishiar that hes tired… The fact that they sent a notification of a guest's arrival means the other side didn't care about it.

"Even though I sent word that I was too tired to see anyone, they still wish to see me?"

The Kishiar by Yuder's side asked with a look that shared the same thought. A response came from beyond the door, breaking the brief silence.

"Yes. They insist on seeing you right now."

"What is their name?"

"They said they couldn't tell us. Only that you would know them if I mentioned the 'Owner of the Dawn'."

Kishiar's eyes sparkled briefly upon hearing these somewhat cryptic words.

"It must be someone from the House of Herne."

"The House of Herne, you say? Why… Ah."

Just as the question was about to be asked, the answer dawned.

The House of Herne is the family of Her Majesty the Empress. The Empress Palace is known as the Dawn Palace… So that's why they used that term.

"Let them in."

“Understood.”

Kishiar straightened up from leaning on Yuder’s shoulder, while Yuder himself stood up and moved a step back to his rightful place behind the man. Kishiar clicked his tongue in apparent disappointment.

“I thought I might get a little rest, but it seems there’s no time for that.”

“Could it be someone from the Herne family… Did the Lord of Charloin summon them?”

“Although the Lord here is of the Herne family’s collateral line, I doubt that’s the case.”

“Why do you say that?”

“Because they mentioned the ‘Owner of the Dawn’.”

As Kishiar spoke, the door opened and a person entered. Removing their luxurious traveler’s robe, platinum blonde hair, nearly identical to the Empress’s, cascaded down.

At first glance, the lady appeared nobly raised. Her strong features could intimidate the viewer, yet the freckles around her eyes and lips softened the harshness. The riding outfit she wore under her robe suited her perfectly.

Yuder recognized her immediately upon her arrival.

‘Myra El Herne.’

Yuder had seen her in his previous life. She was the candidate for Empress from the Herne family, proposed to Emperor Katchian.

Emperor Katchian, an adopted son, had ascended to the throne unusually quickly after only a few years as the Crown Prince,

becoming Emperor without having had an Empress to be. Of course, there were whispers during his time as Crown Prince, but Emperor Keilusa's early demise reset everything to a blank slate.

The four great ducal houses fiercely contested who would sit beside the Emperor. The Diarca family naturally proposed someone from their line, while the other three houses openly criticized Diarca's excessive greed and nominated their own candidates.

Among them, the Herne family boldly proposed a direct descendant, with clear logic.

'The previous Empress was not truly our making. Herne suffered greatly due to her extravagance and various incidents, and we have struggled to cope ever since, so it is only right to give us another chance.'

Despite various events, it seemed Diarca eventually stepped back, allowing Myra El Herne to become the Empress. Naturally, her marriage to the Emperor was anything but smooth.

For reasons unknown, Emperor Katchian had suffered wounds on the night of his wedding in the Empress's Palace, similar to those of claw marks. Hushed rumors circulated the palace, suggesting a physical altercation between the two.

Thereafter, he never visited the Empress's Palace again. Whenever advised to produce an heir, he would erupt in anger, accusing the adviser of harboring treasonous intentions due to his youth.

The House of Herne was displeased, but the House of Diarca and other families were quite satisfied. This situation allowed them to propose their own candidates for the position of concubine or legal wife.

After Emperor Katchian began to cunningly assassinate or manipulate the power holders of other families, including the House of Diarca, Empress Myra's situation worsened. Since she was out of favor with the Emperor and virtually exiled, no one dared to visit her.

The Empress's Palace was always famously quiet, as if empty.

No one knew how she lived there.

Yuder, too, had almost never seen her until his death.

'I never expected to see her here again.'

To be honest, until just moments ago, he had nearly forgotten her name. But upon seeing her face, the memories of her from the wedding resurfaced vividly.

Kishiar, noticing Yuder's subtly furrowed brow and blinking, glanced at him discreetly yet keenly before turning his head with a smile.

"Well, this is a surprise, such an illustrious guest has graced us with their presence."

"You must have known I would come, yet you jest so well."

Myra El Herne retorted coldly.

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“Well, this is a surprise, such an illustrious guest has graced us with their presence.”

“You must have known I would come, yet you jest so well.”

Myra El Herne retorted coldly.

“No, truly, I had no idea. Knowing this is the Herne’s front yard, I anticipated someone from your side would come, but to have the First Princess herself as the first visitor, and unannounced at that, changes the story.”

Kishiar’s words slightly moved Myra’s eyebrows.

“I regret not being able to inform you before my visit. But considering the Duke himself stirred a massive storm in Charloin without any forewarning, a bit of rudeness on my part might be understandable, don’t you think?”

Her words were cleverly crafted. While acknowledging her own fault, she subtly referenced the sudden turmoil caused by Kishiar and the Cavalry. The word ‘storm’ she deliberately chose seemed like a reprimand but actually conveyed admiration, softening the mood.

That single phrase gave Yuder much insight about her.

Firstly, she was certainly not just a delicately raised noble lady.

Her demeanor felt more direct than expected.

And most importantly… it seemed she bore no anger or malice in her approach.

‘So this is the kind of person she is.’

Previously, there hadn’t been a chance to understand her character, making this interaction surprisingly refreshing.

“So, you’re saying you’re here not because of that ‘storm’?”

“Officially, yes. Among the idiots caught by the Cavalry was a relative of mine.”

Myra used the harsh term ‘idiots’ nonchalantly, her expression unchanging, showing her sincerity.

Kishiar’s eyes deepened with interest.

“And unofficially?”

“Frankly, what the Cavalry does with that idiot is none of my concern. My urgency stemmed from feeling the need to meet and converse with the Duke and the Cavalry before the Second Prince.”

“If it’s just a family issue, it seems unnecessary for our Cavalry to intervene. Why must we have this conversation now?”

“Hern is currently deliberating how to handle the Cavalry in light of this incident. While some believe we should use this opportunity to eradicate the troublemakers in the South, others strongly oppose such action. I am among those who advocate for cooperation.”

“Hmm. All I did was destroy one fighting ring that mistreated the Awakeners, and yet everyone is taking it so seriously. We’re already busy recruiting new members. Why not just leave things as they are, as we have been? I’m not particularly concerned about the ‘troublemakers in the South’ or anything of that sort.”

Kishiar shrugged nonchalantly, laughing like a carefree man, seemingly uninterested in the serious matter Myra presented.

Myra’s eyes fleetingly showed surprise, perhaps not expecting such a response. It seemed she expected her straightforward offer of alliance would be immediately welcomed.

‘She’s not adept at hiding her intentions or political maneuvering. Considering her age, that’s expected.’

Among the young nobles of the four great ducal houses they had met so far, Pruelle and Priscilla from Tain house were the smartest and strongest in cool-headed responses. The Apeto brothers were mostly emotional and sinister, except for the gentle and kind Revlin. And Diarca’s Kiolle… was embarrassingly foolish compared to the others.

But showing just enough of her intentions can sometimes make it easier for us to understand and deal with the situation.

Yuder thought this as he scrutinized Kishiar’s face.

It seemed unlikely that Kishiar intended to reject Myra. If they could cooperate with Myra, it would be beneficial for their future endeavors.

However, from Myra’s words alone, it appeared as though Herne and Cavalry weren’t collaborating, but rather, Herne was subtly offering a hand to let Cavalry handle their long-standing problems. That probably was the issue.

Cavalry couldn’t appear as merely assisting Herne. Cooperation should be a process where both parties present their desires and work together as equals. The young First Princess of Herne, desiring to cooperate with the Cavalry, needed to realize this first.

Now, how would the not-yet-twenty-year-old First Princess of Herne react? If she was driven by emotion, she would leave in a cold huff. If reason prevailed, she would make a different decision. Yuder gazed intently at Myra’s face.

“…I don’t think that’s what Cavalry wants.”

After a moment, Myra’s response leaned towards the latter.

“Hmm? How would the Princess know what Cavalry wants?”

“Before coming here, I researched how Cavalry handled this incident. You must have realized from the trapped Awakeners that this wasn’t the only fighting ring. Considering Cavalry’s past actions, it’s unlikely you would stop after just one. You must be planning the next move, aren’t you?”

Despite Kishiar’s seemingly casual counter-question, Myra answered confidently. Her arrival here in less than a day was impressive enough, but having also grasped Cavalry’s operations in that time was quite a feat. And her assumption about their next plan was correct.

“Then?”

“This time, no one suspected Duke Peletta’s presence here, so you could resolve it through infiltration. But now that everything is exposed, others will try their best to hide. Without the cooperation of someone well-acquainted with this place, it might be difficult for you to proceed as you wish. If you give me the chance to cooperate, I swear I will do my utmost to assist.”

“…”

“Let me be more frank. The truth is, if Cavalry steps in and I can assist, it would be a great benefit to me personally. Dealing with the nuisances of the south is what I’ve been most diligently working on as a potential heir of Herne.”

Myra was no fool either. Clearly stating that this situation was definitely beneficial for her implied, ‘there’s no need to suspect any ulterior motives for my offer to cooperate.’ She also decidedly

lowered her stance, positioning herself as someone assisting Cavalry, not the other way around.

“But I’m not the only one thinking this. My biggest competitor, the Second Child Ashrav, likely has the same idea. If he collaborates with Cavalry first, it wouldn’t make much difference to Herne and the south, but it would be a fatal loss for me personally. Therefore… I am determined to cooperate with Cavalry first in handling this matter.”

“So, in essence, you want to aid Cavalry’s efforts to gain an advantage in the succession competition.”

“That’s right.”

Having said that, Myra bowed her head.

“I assume you are already aware, having heard from the owner of the Dawn Palace, but the succession struggle of Herne has been ongoing for a long time, ever since I was born. I have long hoped for her support, and we have been in contact for a while, yet I have not received a clear answer. I cannot hide the fact that my eagerness for this cooperation to succeed partly stems from the hope that it might also secure her support.”

She hadn’t told everything, but what she had shared was enough for one to infer her circumstances.

‘It seems the issue of succession is a problem everywhere.’

Kishiar looked at Myra, her face wrapped in a cold tension, and smiled inscrutably.

“Hmm… I have just one question.”

“Yes?”

“What if, even after hearing all this, we decide to cooperate with the Second Child, who might come seeking us later, instead of the First Princess?”

For a moment, Myra’s expression hardened. She looked at Kishiar with a gaze sharp enough to pierce, and spoke coldly.

“A truly sad hypothesis. Even so, if it benefits Herne and the South, I must endure it. However, I doubt there is anyone else who knows this place better than I do. Perhaps, for a task that could have been easily resolved, the Cavalry will end up taking a very long and roundabout route.”

Her voice was almost threatening. The atmosphere turned icy, and a silence ensued.

It was Kishiar’s laughter that broke the silence.

“Hahaha, they say the First Princess of Herne, born for the first time in 35 years, is full of the true spirit of a daughter of Herne. Indeed, it seems so. I understand. May I take a day to think it over and then contact you?”

Myra looked at him, her eyes filled with astonishment, but soon she nodded.

“Yes. I will be waiting.”

She seemed to regard Kishiar as a very strange man. Yet, her demeanor remained unchanged until she left.

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Chapter 691

After the door closed, Kishiar relaxed his posture and tilted his head back. Through his inverted hair, his red eyes playfully twinkled toward Yuder.

“You still look impressive upside down, my assistant. I noticed the First Princess of Herne seemed quite interested in you. Did you catch that?”

During the conversation, occasionally Myra glanced at Yuder, who was standing behind Kishiar. However, that was mostly out of caution towards an unknown person listening in on her personal matters. She might have guessed his identity by his proximity to Kishiar and his demeanor, but without a formal introduction, there was no reason to acknowledge it. That was the extent of her interest.

Knowing this, Kishiar’s teasing words were just his habit. Listening to him, one might sometimes think everyone in the world had a significant interest in Yuder. As usual, Yuder pretended not to hear and moved on to the main topic.

“The proposal of the First Princess of Herne doesnt seem bad, but what are your plans?”

Yuders nonchalance didn’t bother the man who smirked and straightened up.

“It’s not a bad proposal indeed. The Second Prince might come, but there’s an equal chance he won’t. If nothing major changes, I might accept the First Princesss offer.”

Kishiar then explained why he had asked for a day to think.

“I asked for time to think because it seemed you already knew the First Princess.”

Silence.

“The biggest variable in our current situation is only the ‘previous game’. Have you met Myra El Herne before?”

Quick-witted as always. Yuder moved to sit opposite him, intending to share his story.

“Yes, I have seen her before.”

“Indeed. What role did she play then?”

“There was nothing noteworthy about her role, if that counts as noteworthy.”

Yuder recounted his memories of Myra El Herne, or rather Myra La Orr, from his past life.

The Empress selection battle after Katchian became the Emperor, and Myra, the noble daughter of Herne who won that position. But her misfortune on the first night meant she never saw the light of day again, locked away in the palace. That was all there was to her previous life’s story.

“Thereafter, I never saw her again. Remembering it feels strange.”

Yuder knew only so much, but Kishiar deduced much more from those scant details.

“That means Myra in the previous game didn’t become a successor. And despite years of humiliation, her family completely abandoned her, even though she was an extremely rare legitimate

girl in Herne. This would have been unthinkable under normal circumstances.”

“I had simply thought her family was extremely cautious… Is it that serious?”

At Yuder’s question, Kishiar explained with a gentle smile.

“You might have heard, but Myra is the first legitimate daughter born in Herne in 35 years. Despite the southern tradition of passing wealth to the eldest, connections to the second, and titles to the youngest, her birth as a girl instantly made her the strongest successor candidate. This shows how highly she was valued as the First Princess of Herne.”

The mention of this southern tradition brought back a faint memory.

‘…Did I hear it from Gakane?’

Originally, First Princess Myra was not the eldest but the third child born. However, as a child, she inherited the title of First Princess after her elder siblings died. Many within the current Herne Duke’s family consider the Second Prince, originally the fourth and youngest, a more traditional successor. However, there are not a few who highly value the First Princess’s abilities and the rarity of her being a legitimate daughter. The First Princess herself seemed to have a great ambition for her title, making it a fight worth seeing.

“…I understand. It is indeed strange that the First Princess was not in a position to be unilaterally overwhelmed, yet ended up in a situation where no one sided with her.”

Yuder, despite having enjoyed a position of envy in his past life, was inevitably ignorant of such information. Intimate, personal information among the high nobility is difficult to know unless one is born into that world. How could one know that the Herne Duke’s First

Princess was the first legitimate daughter born in decades, and due to this, she held a position that could even shake the traditional inheritance system?

Nobles tend to tightly conceal even the smallest of matters amongst themselves as great secrets. Only those within their accepted circle are deemed worthy of knowing these secrets.

Despite serving as the Commander of the Cavalry for over ten years, Yuder realized anew that he was outside their circle. He didn't feel bad about it, as he too had pushed others outside his own circle.

"So… Do you remember who the Herne Duke was in the previous game?"

At Kishiar's question, Yuder dredged up a faint memory. As he recalled, after Emperor Katchian's imperial power increased, the dukes couldn't strut around, and Herne was especially reclusive.

No… Even when Emperor Katchian's imperial power was weak, Duke Herne didn't show his face much. It's the same now.

The Duke of Herne, who always stayed in the south for health reasons and rarely appeared in the capital, died of illness after the southern earthquake. There was no direct successor to inherit the title immediately, leading to a period of discontent.

Eventually, a young cousin inherited the title, with most affairs being handled by his parents. They, not having been prominent among the nobility before, were mocked as having reduced Herne to a rural backwater. Whether they knew it or not, the new Duke and his family showed their faces in the capital only once before returning south, never to come back.

What was his name again? Yuder struggled to recall, as they were not well-connected.

It sounds familiar, but

Hearing Yuder’s explanation, Kishiar’s eyes deepened.

“That means, the current Second Prince also passed away early, failing to inherit the ducal title.”

“Yes.”

“It’s not unusual in Herne for people to have short lives. Even the current Duke wasn’t originally in line to succeed, but ended up in that position after all his brothers died early. But… if Myra El Herne had not become the Empress and stayed in Herne, it could have been avoided.”

“Then…”

“It’s plausible to suspect that Myra lost all her support and became the Empress due to some machinations within Herne. The current Duke of Herne has been criticized for not appearing in public for years, likened to a fox digging its burrow. Along with this, we should investigate those who might have been contenders for the succession of the ducal title.”

“And if possible, it would be best to help Myra El Herne keep her name as she wishes.” Kishiar expressed this sentiment succinctly with a single phrase.

“To prevent the same outcome from repeating.”

This held the same meaning as what Yuder had said while playing a strategy game with him.

Despite it being his own words, Yuder felt a renewed pang in his heart as they came from Kishiar’s lips.

The fact that Kishiar La Orr was aligned with his purpose lifted Yuder's spirits.

"Yes."

Yuder nodded deeply in agreement, prompting Kishiar to smile a bit more broadly than before.

Before Kishiar could speak, Yuder took the initiative.

"Then you'll be busier in the future. We should do what you planned to do during today's rest."

"Hmm…"

"Lie down."

The brief respite that Kishiar and he had found amidst their busy schedule was, in fact, to check on Kishiar's health.

Although Kishiar insisted he was fine, it was true that he had used tremendous power overnight, to the point of turning pale from exhaustion. Yuder had insisted on examining his body as soon as they returned.

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Chapter 692

Yuder had insisted on examining his body as soon as they returned.

However, Kishiar argued to the contrary, asserting that Yuder himself, having exerted a lot of strength, might need healing. Though the only marks Yuder bore from felling countless foes were a few mere scrapes and bruises, he could not sway the man's determination to not move until it was confirmed that he was indeed unscathed.

Eventually, the two rested and upon awakening, only after being assured by the physician and priest that they showed no outward signs of trouble, did they find themselves in the present moment.

"You have already confirmed that I am unharmed, so there should be no further delay."

"Um… I thought it might be better to have a snack first, but… well then."

Kishiar quietly opened the flap of his top and lay down on the long bench. Yuder, removing his gloves, placed his hands on the exposed flesh. As soon as he summoned his power, the dark-red veins on the back of his hand expanded rapidly, spreading unimpeded up to his shoulders.

The speed of the spreading power was incomparably faster than before. It wasn't long before Yuder could peer into the interior of Kishiar. The sight of four different powers, tangled like tree roots here and there, and a vessel in the center, protected by a red aura, was always a mystery to behold.

'After healing the Emperor, this seems like nothing.'

Since that experience, Yuder felt it had become easier to wield the power of the Red Stone. While contemplating this, a man unaware of Yuder's thoughts expressed concern.

"Aren't you tired?"

"I am not sweating a drop, so do not worry."

It wasn't just Yuder who found it easier than before. Kishiar also seemed decidedly more comfortable than in the past.

Yuder swiftly examined the multicolored powers flowing within the exposed body.

The state and size of the vessel situated in the middle of Kishiar's body had not changed from before. The difference lay in the total amount of energy spread throughout the body.

While the golden magic and blue aura were visibly abundant, the divine power and the Awakener's strength were notably less than before. Considering that previously, despite the chaos, the extent of the four powers was almost equal, it was evident that their balance had been disrupted.

'Its probably because the divine power and the Awakener's strength were heavily used this time.'

For an ordinary person, possessing even one power is difficult, but Kishiar had four. Maintaining the balance of these powers always required meticulous effort. Disruption of this balance could mean imminent danger to his vessel.

'But… considering that, the vessel itself looks surprisingly well.'

Kishiar's vessel pulsed calmly. There seemed to be no issue with the red aura of the Awakener's power that surrounded it.

Why? In search of an answer, after meticulously examining from head to toe, Yuder realized something.

‘The tangled parts… they’ve reduced.’

Yuder remembered the first time he had opened Kishiar’s body. The four powers, like plant roots, were intertwined, obstructing the flow in various parts of the body. Some areas were knotted, stagnant, while others were blocked and swollen, presenting an ominous sight.

No matter how great and numerous the powers one possessed, what use were they if the inside was in such disarray? The reason he, despite possessing unprecedented powers, had to focus solely on self-regulation his entire life, was now apparent.

But now, the pathways of power and the various parts of the body were considerably cleaner. Although not as orderly as others who possessed only one type of power, it was definitely an improvement compared to before.

‘Could it be that the improvement I felt was not just my imagination?’

Even if the balance among the four types of power was not perfect, as long as they did not interfere with each other, there would be no burden on the body. Although he was not sure what caused this change, it was certainly a good thing for Kishiar.

Yuder, feeling astonished, focused more intently to examine the flow of energy. On closer inspection, he noticed that while the overall amount of the Awakened’s power, predominantly located below the abdomen, had decreased, the red power protecting Kishiar’s vessel seemed to have thickened somewhat.

‘And although it’s faint and hard to be certain… It seems that a bit of the red power is visible in the flow of other energies entering and

leaving the vessel. Does this change mean that Kishiar's Awakener power has overall become stronger?'

As he observed, Yuder's head gradually tilted forward. He realized this when he felt a firm pressure on the abdomen and heard a voice.

Inspecting with such zeal is fine, but at this rate, your nose might touch the belly.

Yuder stiffened his shoulders and raised his head, realizing that he had indeed come almost that close without knowing.

My apologies.

No… It was rather too delightful. So, how does it look? Is there something surprisingly remarkable?

Kishiar could see his insides if he moved his head a little, but he couldn't see as clearly as Yuder, who was looking down from above. Yuder slowly nodded and spoke.

Despite the reduction in the divine power and the Awakener's power you used yesterday, the state of the vessel is better than before. Especially, the entangled flow of energy inside seems much more orderly compared to before.

As he spoke, the red energy at the touched spot gently fluctuated, as if it recognized the power in his hand as its kin.

Really? Indeed… I have been feeling that using power has become easier lately.

It's a relief that it hasn't had a bad effect on the vessel.

It's probably thanks to your aide. Being together helps in stabilizing the mind and body.

I haven’t done anything, though.

While replying to the light-hearted joke and about to withdraw his power, Yuder suddenly remembered Enon’s words.

He said that Yuder’s soul had become remarkably stable after their bodies had intertwined. Though he was still unsure what ‘stability of the soul’ meant, if this mysterious and invisible connection between them strengthened and influenced that aspect, wouldn’t Kishiar be affected similarly?

Moreover, as Yuder’s body was practically a living medium for the Red Stone, the ‘stability’ might have influenced Kishiar’s body and power.

‘…Now that I think about it, wasn’t there a time in the arena when he felt better after using a lot of divine power and then coming into contact with me?’

Perhaps this was a matter worth pondering.

Yuder summarized this thought briefly. The man who heard the speculation fell into thought and then nodded.

“That could be possible. Indeed, I did feel a sudden stabilization at that time. It seems worth testing.”

What the test entailed was obvious. It was physical contact, as before. The easiest of course, was a kiss.

“Are you alright?” was asked with a note of concern.

“I’m always fine,” came the ever-confident reply.

“If that’s the case, I’ll just give a slight kiss,” was suggested gently.

“Okay. I’ll close my eyes and wait. It feels thrilling, like a beauty waiting for a knight’s kiss in a classic novel,” was said with a flutter of excitement.

Would a usual recipient of a kiss speak like that? But, given it was Kishiar, it wasn’t surprising.

Yuder, without a word, slowly leaned forward, his power to peer into Kishiar’s inner being still active. Though a familiar act, looking down at those smiling lips, closed eyes, he felt a careful tension rather than familiarity, tautly pulling at his nerves.

Yuder exhaled a long, thin breath and then overlapped their lips.

A sudden, light, fiery tingling swept through him, causing his fingertips to tremble faintly.

“…”

Why did such a small touch always feel like sparks flying?

Kishiar, feeling the tense touch, might have found it amusing.

Yuder had thought so, but that thought melted away the moment he sensed the scent enveloping his body, rising unbidden.

Despite not being in a state to unrestrainedly release scent, the simultaneous blooming of their scents meant both were unable to control their emotions at that moment.

After responding to the intertwining movement within their lips for a while, Yuder finally lifted his head. He opened his eyes, wet lips parting, and gazed into the red eyes of the man caressing his cheek, sensing a premonition.

Even if there were hundreds, thousands more kisses in the future, if they were with Kishiar La Orr, each would bring the same

tension.

How could it not? When he was here.

“Well, seeing this with my own eyes, there seems no need for further tests. The result is clear,” Yuder remarked, finally lowering his gaze.

Inside Kishiar, the energies were much more settled than before.

As Yuder had said, there seemed no need for further confirmation.

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Chapter 693

“Your Majesty, urgent news has just arrived from the Cavalry. It seems there was a clash in the Capital’s Fifth Wall District between the healers of the Crown Prince and their former colleagues, resulting in the partial destruction of a building. The number of casualties has yet to be confirmed, but several members of the Cavalry are currently infiltrating the scene to apprehend the perpetrators and manage the situation.”

Emperor Keilusa halted his meal, which he was sharing with the Empress. She looked at him with eyes full of concern.

“Your Majesty”

The Emperor, showing no sign of surprise and indicating he was fine, nodded and then directed his order to the head attendant who brought the news.

“It’s hardly been any time since I warned about their absence from their posts today, and already an incident occurs. Contact the Imperial Knights and the Capital Security Guards immediately to assist in evacuating and managing the civilians nearby, and to track and arrest any suspicious individuals in the vicinity. And send this item to the Cavalry, instructing them to take it to the scene.”

The Emperor handed over a small flower that had been decorating the dining table, having imbued it with his power. The head attendant carefully received it, bowing deeply.

“Understood, Your Majesty.”

The Emperor’s orders, seemingly ordinary, carried a clear intent. He commanded that no forces other than the Cavalry be involved in the scene, focusing solely on the management of the surroundings.

This strategy not only prevented other groups from interfering with the Cavalry but also prepared for managing public opinion in the aftermath.

“It seems we must conclude our meal here. There’s no need for you to skip your meal because of this burden. Perhaps you should take the rest with you.”

“That’s alright. I too shall return to the Dawn Palace and ensure this matter doesn’t spread unnecessarily. And I must send a message to Duke Pelleta in the south. It would be faster for me to act than for Your Majesty.”

The Empress rose from her seat, mentioning her responsibilities. Seeing her tense yet firm expression, a faint smile finally appeared on the Emperor’s face.

“You’re a great support. I’ll send news as soon as the matter is settled. If anything happens, summon me. You know the way.”

The Emperor’s gaze fell on a decorative flower on a button the Empress had recently started wearing. Through it, he always kept an eye on her surroundings, ready to respond swiftly should she face any danger.

The Empress gently touched the button, nodding.

“Of course, I know.”

The couple clasped hands firmly, then parted ways.

Returning to his office, Emperor Keilusa soon received a report from the Cavalry that the situation had been resolved. However, not everything had gone as the Cavalry had originally planned.

The Emperor could guess the situation to some extent through the flower he had sent but needed more detailed information. He

secretly and quickly summoned the Cavalry members who were at the scene.

Soon, the intelligence members hurried to him and prostrated themselves. However, the pharmacist Enon was not among them. Officially, he was assisting with the treatment of the injured from the scene, but in reality, he had openly refused, saying, ‘Why go when it’s enough without me?’

The Emperor scanned the faces of the prostrated Cavalry members. Most were covered in dust, and a few even smelled of blood, clearly having rushed here without time to clean themselves.

Among them, a strikingly handsome man with red hair and a strong scent of blood caught the Emperor’s attention.

“I remember seeing you before. Sir Gakane Bolunwald. You bravely stood and fought for me.”

There was no need to mention where the fight happened, but they both knew the answer, so that was enough.

I am honored that you remember me, Your Majesty.

Can you explain what happened today?

Gakane, kneeling on one knee and with a faint flush on his face, recounted the day’s happenings.

“Today, we received information that a particularly dangerous faction within the group known as ‘the Star of Nagran’ was gathering in the capital. We were on standby nearby. The intelligence was accurate, and we witnessed them entering a meeting place. However, not long after, an explosion occurred there.”

Gakane recalled the moment he and Devran rushed towards the house from which the explosion sounded. The interior was already in

chaos upon their arrival.

Through the half-destroyed wall, they glimpsed a scene in the corridor: people holding those bleeding and fallen, confronting others. Gakane quickly recognized Nahan on the side of the fallen and a middle-aged ‘Sage’ on the opposite.

The conversation they overheard was troubling.

“Nahan, I see the caliber of those who follow you! Blinded by independence, daring to attack us!”

“What nonsense! Didnt you see Nahan rise first to attack? You, Langbarton, manipulated Exy to strike!”

“Trying to pin the blame on us? Look at what your people have done! You are no longer our brothers or allies!”

Gakane paused his movement, absorbing the gravity of their words.

In the tense standoff, with everyone readying their powers for an attack, Nahan, almost entirely seen from behind, spoke softly.

“So, this is your will.”

“Nahan, don’t stoke misunderstandings with such words. Despite warnings, you came here without consulting, endangering our brothers and sisters. Why act so rashly?”

The middle-aged man, his hood drawn deep, spoke with genuine regret.

“Me, rash? Perhaps. But isnt it more reckless to never intend to keep promises?”

“Nahan! How dare you speak to the Sage like that!”

Someone shouted in anger, but Nahan remained unmoved.

“When you saved my life, I wasnt grateful. But the name ‘the Star of Nagran’ you gave me, and the purpose behind it, moved me deeply. I thought I could do anything for it.”

Nahans words carried an eerie weight. Despite his weakened voice from a long injury, it only made his words more chilling, like the sound of rusted metal, silencing everyone.

Even Gakane and Devran hesitated to enter, such was the cold, heavy aura filling the space.

Nahan continued.

“But I began to doubt when the promise kept being delayed. Why did I believe it so? It occurred to me I was the only one who promised; you never gave a firm answer.”

“Nahan, the time is not yet right…”

“How many times did I ask when that ‘time’ would come? I came here for an answer, but you give none, and the others stand like puppets, erecting walls to block me. If this isnt the answer, what is? Even as a brother’s life is lost, you remain silent?”

The Sage remained silent.

Nahan, who had been standing still, waiting for a response, let out a low laugh.

“…Now I see. You’re afraid of me, aren’t you, Sage?”

At that moment, even the Awakeners following Nahan looked at him in surprise. Gakane and Devran also snapped to alertness.

“Devran!”

“Got it!”

Devran immediately used his ability, emitting flames. As the fire burst through the partially destroyed wall, the confronting Awakeners turned in confusion.

“Who is this?”

“We’re from the Cavalry.”

Gakane didn’t elaborate further. The reason was simple. Yuder Aile, the reliable leader of the intelligence department and a close comrade of theirs, had hinted at a similar situation in a recent letter.

“Should the Star of Nagran be listed as a collaborator with the Cavalry soon, they are likely to react in some way. They’ll start suspecting and confronting each other. If you happen to face them in this process, don’t waste words. Just reveal your identity as the Cavalry and respond accordingly. They’ll figure out the rest themselves.”

Indeed, Yuder’s prediction was spot on. Those who didn’t expect the Cavalry to arrive so swiftly were taken aback, glaring at each other.

“So quick… You called them!”

“What nonsense. It must have been you!”

Amidst the shouting, someone attacked Gakane and Devran. It was a flame ability, similar to Devran’s. However, when Devran waved his hand, the fire rushing towards them dissipated. Although his fire-controlling ability was still lacking in firepower and control compared to Yuder’s, his capacity to manipulate other Awakeners with fire abilities as if they were his own earned him high regard. His diligent practice had paid off, enabling him to perform such feats almost effortlessly.

“Sage! Get away! We’ll handle this…”

“Nahan! Run!”

Chaos erupted instantly. Gakane summoned his shadow clones to counter those rushing towards him, while also spotting the Sage trying to cleverly retreat with a few people. He called out to Devran.

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Chapter 694

Chaos erupted instantly. Gakane summoned his shadow clones to counter those rushing towards him, while also spotting the Sage trying to cleverly retreat with a few people. He called out to Devran.

“Devran! I’ll handle things here. You go after them!”

“Got it!”

As Devran disappeared, the remaining Awakeners on Nahan’s side focused their attacks on Gakane. Though they tried to restrain and blind him with various abilities, Gakane’s skills had improved significantly, now able to withstand even the diverse powers of his comrades in the Cavalry.

Drawing his sword, which he had been practicing fervently, Gakane felt a surge of confidence. Despite facing numerous opponents alone, his tension was surprisingly low.

‘Visible’ attacks, like water and fire, could be avoided by simple evasion. For ‘invisible’ attacks that aimed to suffocate or blind, he could disperse them using his shadow clone, which would lose its target once it became imperceptible or intangible.

Gakane fought adeptly, concealing and revealing his position at will through his shadow clone. The clone’s advantage was its ability to change size and disappear without harming Gakane himself. His attackers were disoriented, as he seemed to vanish and reappear from their blind spots in an instant.

However, Nahan’s side wasn’t just up against Gakane. Surprisingly, some Awakeners from the Sage’s side remained, now more wary of each other than of the Cavalry. They stayed to attack

their former allies, hoping to buy time for the Sage's escape and punish Nahan for perceived treachery.

"Nahan! Even if I die, I won't let you off easily! Don't think you can escape alive!"

Seeing this, Nahan's Awakeners fell into despair and rage, believing the Sage had truly abandoned them to ally with the Cavalry. The fact that one of them had followed the fleeing Sage seemed trivial, a ploy easily executed.

"Dammit! The Sage really abandoned us…!"

"Nahan! Can you run? We'll all die at this rate!"

"Nahan! Do something…! We trusted you and followed you here! This is all your fault!"

Gakane summarized this tumult to the Emperor:

"Some rushed at us, some tried to help others escape, and others fought among themselves, creating internal chaos."

As some of the Sage's Awakeners attacked those trying to escape with Nahan, fighting broke out on all sides. With the focus shifting from Gakane to infighting, he found himself with some breathing room.

"…These people. Now they're completely fighting each other?"

Although bewildered, Gakane didn't mind the turn of events. He kept his guard up, surveying the situation while waiting for reinforcements from the Cavalry.

At that moment, Nahan, struggling for breath and supported by others, suddenly raised his head. His burned face and unfocused eyes scanned everyone in the space.

Amidst hurried movements, his injuries worsened, staining various parts of his clothing with blood. A man, pale-faced and seemingly too weak to exert any strength, gasped for breath before speaking.

“Everyone, stop.”

Thud.

Instantly, a daze enveloped everyone’s minds, Gakane included.

Realizing too late that this was the effect of Nahan’s power, Gakane tried to turn his head, but it was already too late.

His head felt foggy, and his vision darkened. Dizziness made it impossible to stand properly. He recognized the disorienting hallucinations but couldn’t think clearly enough to find a way out…

What is this? What should I do? No, I just want to stay like this. It’s too dizzying… Is it night now? Or day? Where am I? I feel like vomiting. Amidst these disjointed thoughts, he bit his lip desperately.

Blood began to flow from his forcefully clenched lips, bringing back some faint awareness of sight and hearing through the pain.

In his drunkenly spinning vision, someone was screaming, but he couldn’t discern whether he was standing or lying down, let alone understand the screams.

He moved his hands, tearing at his own flesh. Striking the ground and hitting himself slowly brought back more sensations. Only then did he realize he was lying on the ground. Groping the ground, he found that his sword had been flung away in the fall.

“Damn.”

He recalled learning swordsmanship to become a knight. For a knight, losing one's sword was a profoundly shameful thing.

How could I think of regaining my sword, only to lose it?

The faces of his taciturn but merciless new master Nathan Zuckerman, and his friend Yuder Aile, even more intimidating and resolute than Zuckerman, flashed in his mind. Gakane gasped for air, shaking his head to regain focus. He saw someone's back - it was Nahan.

"Stop right there…!"

As Gakane shouted hoarsely, Nahan turned around. He stood alone on his feet in the space, lips bleeding endlessly with a face marred by terrifying burn marks, staring expressionlessly at Gakane.

Attempting to summon his shadow clone reflexively, Gakane found his body still struggling with the aftereffects of the hallucination, unable to fully harness his familiar power. It was a truly vicious ability.

"…I told you to stop… The Cavalry is already surrounding us… Just give up…"

He intended to retrieve his sword and attack while urging surrender. But then, Nahan spoke.

"I doubted it, but seeing your tenacity and ability, you really must be of the Cavalry. Oddly, you seem less affected by my power."

Puzzled by these words, Gakane hesitated, and Nahan asked:

"Has the Cavalry really joined forces with the Sage?"

"…"

“…Right. Whatever the answer, it doesn’t matter now. The important thing is that I have to start again on my own.”

Was he prepared to fight? Gakane, tensed, gathered his strength again, barely managing to conjure his shadow clone, staggering and wavering. Despite feeling nauseous enough to vomit, he stood up on his feet, facing Nahan.

The man twisted his scarred face, lifting the corners of his lips slightly.

“I don’t kill brothers. Even after facing me like this, the Cavalry still doesn’t understand me.”

…

“I have no intention of abandoning my sole objective. If someone asks about my future plans, tell them that.”

Afterward, Gakane’s consciousness once again faded. When he came to, his comrades from the Cavalry, including Devran, were shaking him.

“Gakane! Come to your senses! What happened?”

“…”

Having relayed this much, Gakane bowed his head in apology to the Emperor.

“My comrade Devran and I both failed to capture our respective targets. This was all due to my inability to make the best decision at that time. I am sorry.”

Devran, who had pursued the Sage, had also ultimately failed to capture him. The Sage and his party had vanished as if they had soared into the sky, by some unknown means.

Though they had captured those they had defeated earlier and those who had fallen due to Nahan's power, Gakane couldn't bring himself to lift his head.

"Sir Bolunwald, lift your head."

Emperor Keilusa called to him. Gakane cautiously raised his eyes. Surprisingly, the Emperor's expression was not one of anger.

"I was already aware of Nahan's formidable abilities. He had escaped even from the grasp of Baron Aile and Duke Peletta. As for the Sage, wherever he may flee, I have an idea of his whereabouts, so it is alright."

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Chapter 695

“I was already aware of Nahan’s formidable abilities. He had escaped even from the grasp of Baron Aile and Duke Peletta. As for the Sage, wherever he may flee, I have an idea of his whereabouts, so it is alright.”

“And Your Majestys guess would be…?” asked Gakane, unable to restrain himself from interrupting the Emperor, despite knowing better.

Instead of taking offense, the Emperor kindly explained, “The Cavalry and I are aware of what these individuals have done within these palace walls, and their origins, yet they remain unaware of our knowledge. If they could escape unseen, cloaked in robes with faces hidden, where else would they return but here?”

Those driven by a strong sense of caution, prioritizing their lives, would not return to the palace. Emperor Keilusa speculated that the Sage would not have embarked on such a venture in the first place. His deduction was exceedingly accurate.

“The task for the Cavalry is straightforward,” the Emperor continued. “The Cavalry shall aid me in capturing them upon their return to the palace, and pursue the fleeing Nahan.”

Having issued his command, the Emperor made it clear to Gakane that further apologies were unnecessary. His approach was generous yet stern, and pragmatic. For Gakane and the other members of the Intelligence Unit, witnessing the Emperor’s demeanor up close and receiving direct orders was a first, and they were deeply impressed.

“We shall heed your command!”

As the Intelligence Unit members left the palace, other members of the Cavalry greeted them, waving in welcome. They were a support team, sent in response to a message from Enon. Among them stood the Shin Deputy Commander Ever.

Relaxed after the tension, they conversed casually on their way back.

“It’s a relief no one was seriously hurt. I was really worried when I saw Gakane fall,” Ever remarked.

“Haha, sorry for startling you, Ever,” replied Gakane.

To Gakane’s apology, the Eldore siblings suddenly thumped his back and hips. Their touches, though meant as encouragement, carried a lot of emotion.

“Ouch! Why… why hit me?”

“Didn’t His Majesty say not to apologize anymore? Why are you still doing it? That’s why it’s a punishment!”

“Punishment! Instead of apologizing, focus on gathering more information on Nahan! Next time we encounter him, he won’t get away so easily!”

“Ouch. Ah. Um. Okay, I’ll talk. I was going to anyway, so please stop hitting me.”

Gakane blushed with embarrassment, being struck on the hips by the shorter Hinn and Finn siblings.

He sighed deeply, recalling his standoff with Nahan. The other members, sensing what he was thinking, grew solemn.

“I had heard about Nahan’s illusion abilities from Yuder and Priest Lusan, but experiencing them firsthand… they were truly

formidable.”

“You couldn’t counter them at all?”

“Almost… That’s how it seemed. The mere disruption of my vision was enough to render me powerless, even knowing it was an illusion. If Nahan had intended to kill me with his abilities, I might not be here now.”

“Don’t say that. You’re not that weak. Don’t underestimate yourself,” said Devran, frowning.

Though everyone agreed with Devran, Gakane’s expression remained unlifted.

Gakane reflected on the past training they had received from Yuder, specifically designed to counter mental abilities. “Striking my body and surroundings to regain my senses proved to be helpful. It’s best not to enter Nahan’s illusion range, but remembering this could be beneficial for everyone,” he advised.

“Nahan is indeed a troublesome opponent. A fight usually ends with a single decisive blow, but his ability to suddenly obscure vision can disorient anyone. It’s almost like cheating!”

“He’s simply mastered his abilities early on, utilizing them effectively. Everyone knows that illusions have no real substance,” Ever, assessing the situation coolly, commented.

“That just means he’s clever for no good reason. We’ve trained tirelessly to master our skills one by one… Why did such a person even enter the Star of Nagran?”

Hearing the complaints, Gakane sighed softly and continued, “As I told His Majesty earlier, Nahan has no intention of abandoning his goals. He won’t just disappear quietly. Whether he’ll target the Sage again or flee elsewhere is uncertain.”

“It’s a complicated issue… Anyway, I’ve sent a message to Yuder in the south. Let’s see what he replies.”

“I bet Yuder’s reply will contain three lines about Nahan and ten pages of a new training menu for us. I’ll bet my evening snack on it.”

“Ten pages? Are you kidding? That’s probably ten pages per person. I’m betting the special Friday meal!”

“What? Then I’ll bet…”

Amid the bustling chatter of the Cavalry members, Gakane gazed upwards with a heavy expression.

‘I wanted to do well while Yuder was away… but this time, it seems difficult.’

Meanwhile, Jack, who had narrowly escaped becoming Yuder Aile’s fighting opponent in the betting arena, finally completed a lengthy investigation and left the room.

His colleagues, who had been waiting for him since he entered and had not slept all night, greeted him with tired faces.

“Uh… How long have you all been here…?”

“We’ve been here since you went in! Why?”

The young Awakeners, who had spent a long time together on the Star of Nagran, glared at him with red eyes.

“You fool. Did you think we’d be happy with you earning money that way? In a betting arena, no less. What if you had died there!”

“Sorry… I must have been bewitched back then,” Jack apologized, bowing his head. Throughout the joint investigation by the Cavalry and the Imperial Army, he had learned about the dangers of the betting arena, the stories of other Awakeners who

had been trapped there for over a year, and the fate of those who had died. If Yuder and the Cavalry Commander hadn't shown up, he and his friends might have died unnoticed.

He bitterly regretted his foolishness, realizing he could have risked not only his life but his friends' as well.

"Don't you know why we left our base to come here? We all wanted to live safely. Just when things seemed to be looking up after passing the first round of the Cavalry's selection… Who asked you to earn money? Why did you do it!"

"Stop it. Jack is reflecting on his actions. He's understood his mistake now," consoled one Awakener, gently patting the teary-eyed Jack's head.

"At least you're back safe. The Cavalry has agreed to provide us with accommodations and meals until the end of the second exam. So now, just focus on preparing for the test, okay?"

"Yes… I really won't do it again," Jack promised solemnly.

His companions knew all too well why Jack had engaged in such dangerous activities. Their hearts ached with understanding, and they felt immense gratitude towards the Cavalry for rescuing the boys.

The fearsome rumors they had heard about the Cavalry on the Star of Nagran bore no resemblance to the reality. The Cavalry did not ignore or indiscriminately capture Awakeners, nor did they exercise force without cause.

Even someone like Jack, who had nearly become a criminal with his foolish actions, was rescued and sent back unharmed. The investigation was merely to hear about their experiences in the arena; there was no coercion or harm involved.

It was incomprehensible why there were rumors that spread in the Star of Nagran of Awakeners being captured and killed here simply for being Awakeners.

Reunited with his companions, Jack quickly recovered his cheerful disposition. He excitedly recounted his encounters with Yuder Aile and the Cavalry Commander at the arena. Though pretending otherwise, everyone listened intently to his stories, especially captivated by the tale of Yuder single-handedly defeating hundreds of Nukijo's subordinates on and off the arena stage. The Awakeners from the Star of Nagran, in a mix of belief and skepticism, inquired,

"A person fighting alone like that? Without a single injury? Is that even possible?"

"Even if Yuder Aile is known for his remarkable feats in the west… Jack, that sounds exaggerated."

"No, it's true! I saw it with my own eyes!"

"Indeed. The boy's account is accurate. I witnessed it as well."

Interrupting Jack's defense, a massive figure with horns and wings chimed in, surprising the Awakeners from the Star of Nagran.

"Uh… who are you…?"

"I'm also one of the Awakeners who was trapped there. My name is Elpkins. And like you, I'm a candidate for the Cavalry. I've just passed the first round."

"Oh… I see. Congratulations."

"Thank you."

Elpkins grinned. He expressed his relief at seeing Jack safe, remembering having seen him in the arena. Despite his intimidating appearance, Elpkins' kind demeanor quickly won over the other Awakeners. Recognizing his sincerity and simplicity, they found it easy to connect with him, sharing similar circumstances.

As Elpkins and Jack continued exchanging stories of Yuder Aile's heroics, an audience gradually gathered around them. Other Awakeners from the arena who had finished their investigations, members of the Cavalry who had taken a break from work, and even special forces of the Imperial Army out for a meal joined in.

Everyone sat together, enthusiastically sharing their accounts of the extraordinary events they had witnessed, their eyes shining as they shared their mutual excitement.

By the next day, the events at the arena had evolved into a legendary tale.

Yuder Aile himself was unaware of this, but the Cavalry Commander Kishiar La Orr, upon hearing the story from a loyal adjutant, burst into hearty laughter.

"What a fantastic story. I like it. Maybe I should add a bit more to it?"

Nathan Zuckerman, as always, indulgently tolerated his lord's sincere jest. The story thus gained even more momentum, transforming into a near-mythical legend of Yuder Aile single-handedly defeating a thousand enemies and a hundred monsters, sweeping them away like fallen leaves.

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Chapter 696

Yuder engaged in conversation with Sunz and Emon, blissfully unaware of the events unfolding elsewhere.

“I’m truly delighted to finally face you again, Yuder. It’s a bit late, but heartfelt congratulations on receiving the title of Baron!”

“Thank you.”

“Here, this. It’s nothing much, but a congratulatory gift.”

Sunz, slightly embarrassed, handed over something. It was a pair of very small knives, wearable inside one’s clothing.

“This is”

“When Emon and I were promoted, we received these. In the imperial army, it’s customary to receive two upon promotion: one for personal use and the other as a spare. They’re quite handy for various tasks, like cutting wood or cooking during long training missions.”

Though he had rushed and couldn’t bring an official gift for the Cavalry’s southern branch, he had planned to send these knives to the Cavalry soon. While not a typical gift, they held significant meaning.

“I’m not sure if I should accept something meant as a spare for future use.”

“It’s fine! Officially, they’re spares, but you can consider them commemorative gifts.”

“That’s right. It’s only fair to give them to you, as our promotions were all thanks to you. You can’t refuse.”

Such gifts were usually given to parents or lovers. Yet, Sunz and Emon, without hesitation, decided to give their only spare knife to Yuder. Yuder felt a strange mix of emotions, realizing the depth of their gratitude.

Yuder, examining the southern army’s insignia etched on the small knife’s handle, bowed his head in thanks.

“It will be useful. I’ll make good use of it. Congratulations on your promotions as well.”

“Thank you!”

Sunz’s eyes sparkled happily.

“We never imagined rising from ordinary soldiers to leaders of a special forces unit. It still feels unbelievable. But we’ve resolved not to be content here. We’re aiming higher now, confident in forging our own path.”

Initially, upon their reunion in this life, Yuder had briefly considered preemptively ending their lives for convenience, fearing a repeat of a future where he might fall at their hands.

However, he chose not to and instead helped them, building a camaraderie.

At the time, he wondered if it was the right choice. But now, looking back, he was certain it was.

While Sunz leading the special forces unit of Awakener Brigade within the imperial army was the same as in his previous life, everything else had changed. Yuder no longer saw them as enemies of himself and the Cavalry.

Yuder spoke earnestly.

“That’s true. You’re certainly capable of climbing higher, especially considering your impressive performance in this recent mission.”

“Haha, you’re too kind. We didn’t really help much in this mission rather, we ended up getting injured and needing treatment.”

Sunz awkwardly reflected on his injured subordinates from their battle with Cyregina. Yuder shook his head.

“That’s not true. All members of our Cavalry unanimously agreed that without the imperial army’s assistance, we wouldn’t have even discovered the secret passage. Your improved abilities were evident from that alone, so there’s no need for such humility.”

Without Sunz’s see-through vision, they wouldn’t have found the secret passage, and facing Cyregina, with her ability to become invisible, would have been extremely difficult. His skills were so valuable that it was regrettable he wasn’t part of the Cavalry Division.

Emon, too, had achieved remarkable growth in his flame abilities, thanks to following Yuder’s advice in his training. His ability to swiftly sprinkle tiny flames in crucial moments during battle, akin to sparks from a flint, had significantly reduced the number of injuries a fact that could not be overstated.

This success was entirely possible because they earnestly embraced Yuder’s guidance. It was rare to find those in the world who would take advice from a virtual stranger so seriously and work diligently to follow it.

Yuder, representing the Cavalry, expressed his gratitude to them.

“The Cavalry will never forget the assistance you’ve provided this time. Any treatment and compensation will naturally be taken care of by us. If there’s anything lacking, please feel free to let us know.”

“Wow. Oh, no. Really, what we’ve received so far is more than enough!”

Sunz, taken aback by the formal gratitude, waved his hands and scratched his head with a smile.

“General Gino, who dispatched us here, told us to assist the Cavalry and learn as much as we could before our unit officially makes its presence known in the world. At first, we were worried that our assistance might actually put the Cavalry in a difficult position… but as the Cavalry members said, there was no need for such concern.”

The southern imperial army, supposedly just visiting, turned out to be a special unit composed of Awakeners. They had significantly contributed to the destruction of the underground fighting rings, aiding the Cavalry. Under normal circumstances, this would have caused uproar among the nobility and the existing power structures, particularly those not in good terms with General Gino.

However, no such uproar occurred. The reason was simple: the unexpected help from the demonstrators in front of the southern branch of the Cavalry, neutralized by Kishiar and Yuder immediately upon their arrival, played a peculiar role in this outcome.

Right after the incident, the panicked nobles and power brokers, upon learning of the Cavalry Commander and Yuder’s presence, hastily summoned the protest leaders, who they thought would be well aware of the circumstances surrounding the southern branch of the Cavalry.

What could these leaders say before their superiors, who demanded explanations? They couldn’t admit their ignorance of the

Cavalry Commander's presence, so naturally, they had to amplify the reasons for ceasing the protest.

"We told you yesterday, didn't we? The atmosphere in the Cavalry was unusual. In truth, we had been silenced. It wasn't that I wanted to; you just wouldn't listen to my words!"

"Please rethink all the information that you know about the Cavalry. Disregarding them is not advisable! What we saw with our own eyes they are truly formidable. Surely, there must be cooperation between Emperor, Duke Peletta, and General Gino…!"

"Wouldn't it be better for us to exchange information with the Cavalry and build a good relationship for the future? Remember what happened in the West…"

As administrators, merchants, and mages the traditional power structures began to sway in a different direction, the issue of the imperial army became relatively insignificant.

The situation was further complicated by the capture of young nobles at the fighting rings. Now, the tables had turned, and it was they who found themselves vulnerable. As the Cavalry members confidently predicted, Sunz and Emon had nothing to worry about.

"What the Cavalry has done for us is actually what we should have done ourselves. Rather than receiving more, we owe you our gratitude."

"That's right. To be honest, instead of parting ways after receiving thanks, we'd prefer to spend more time with the Cavalry. So, tell us… where will you strike next?"

More candid in nature than Sunz, Emon lowered his voice to ask Yuder a question.

Yuder felt a sense of satisfaction, as they preempted what he had intended to say, and he responded.

“Of course, we don’t plan to stop here. Starting this evening, we will begin searching for the remaining illegal fighting rings. Your assistance would certainly be welcome.”

“Although we haven’t stayed in Charloin, we are still part of the southern army. We assure you, we can be of help!”

This was a promising attitude. Yuder himself wouldn’t participate in the upcoming cooperative operation to root out illegal fighting rings between the southern branch and the imperial army’s special force, as he had other commitments. Yet, he showed no concern about this.

“Good. The operation will be led by the leader of the southern branch, Kurga. Please discuss it with him.”

“Oh. So, Yuder and the Cavalry Commander won’t be participating further?”

“That’s right. I would have joined if I had the time, but unfortunately, I have other matters to attend to.”

“Ah of course, you can’t be tied up with just this one issue.”

“However, we may need your help with other tasks. May we contact you then?”

“Certainly!”

Sunz and Emon, until they left, showed no trace of their previous listless demeanor, conversing animatedly and with energy. Yuder sat quietly, listening as they discussed their achievements in the southern army, the events leading to the formation of the Awakener Brigade Special Forces Unit, and their future activities.

It wasn’t all business talk, but it was certainly a worthwhile time.

After parting with the two soldiers of the imperial army, Yuder returned to where Kishiar was. Throughout his walk, he felt more gazes on him than usual, but as always, he didn’t pay much attention.

“Commander. I have returned.”

“Ah, good timing. The investigation results on Cyregina just came in.”

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Chapter 697

“Commander. I have returned.”

“Ah, good timing. The investigation results on Cyregina just came in.”

Kishiar, who had been perusing documents, looked up and smiled. Whatever had transpired during Yuder’s absence, it seemed to have put him in a remarkably good mood.

Yuder’s gaze briefly lingered on the radiant Kishiar, who seemed capable of brightening even the dullest weather, before shifting to Nathan Zuckerman standing silently beside him. A wordless exchange of looks passed between the two, each renowned within their respective groups for their composure.

‘What happened?’

‘…’

Nathan Zuckerman offered no response. This implied that while something had occurred to brighten Kishiar’s mood, it was not immediately pressing enough to inquire about.

‘Well, no matter. If it’s necessary, Kishiar will discuss it later.’

Yuder calmly approached Kishiar and took the documents he offered, reading them. They contained a summarized report penned by a Cavalry member tasked with investigating Cyregina.

“As you will see, as she herself admitted, she knows a lot about the corruption that Nukijo has committed. This includes a list of all the VIPs who visited the Awakener Combat Arena since its inception,

buried crimes within, external forces bribed by Nukijo, and even the location of his hidden slush funds."

"…That's quite extensive."

Despite being a summary, the document was voluminous enough to require binding. Even in small print, it spanned well over ten pages.

"Yes. With this much, she might receive a significant reduction in her sentence. The most intriguing part, though, is on page three."

Yuder flipped directly to the third page. His scanning eyes suddenly stopped on a particular section.

Although they didn't frequently visit the arena, there were merchants from the Southern countries who occasionally contacted Nukijo. Their distinctive appearance, usually concealed but revealed in Nukijo's presence, made them memorable. According to Nukijo, it was their influence that led him to establish the Awakener Combat Arena. Recently, some of them visited Nukijo, engaging in a lengthy discussion. Nukijo mentioned striking a deal with them for importing 'salt' that had quality issues…

It was clear this was the section that had piqued Kishiar's interest. The report continued with more detailed descriptions of these Southern merchants and the euphemistic 'salt.'

"In the back alleys of Charloin, the term for a powdered substance usually refers to drugs. Among them, 'salt' is synonymous with high-quality drugs, particularly revered in the South, near the sea, as a vital ingredient."

In other words, the 'salt' with quality issues meant high-grade drugs that, for some reason, had become difficult to sell at their true value.

Yuder lifted his eyes from the document, a cold yet pleased smile on his face.

“…I was about to start looking for them, and now they’ve come to us.”

Yuder was confident these were the same Southern merchants they had missed in the West. His instincts as a former Cavalry Commander were certain. Kishiar’s expression echoed the sentiment.

“It seems they’ve only just realized that the powder we tampered with was spoiled. It would’ve been quite difficult if they hadn’t noticed by now. Lucky for us, isn’t it?”

“Disposing of the problematic goods would be wasteful, yet proceeding with the original plan to sell them would be difficult. Such items would surely raise suspicions wherever they’re sold.”

“We’ll just have to follow the trail of suspicion then,” Kishiar replied in rhythm.

“Nukijo had planned to meet them in three days to receive the drugs. But with his death, they must be in quite a predicament.”

“I see where we can assist the First Princess of Herne.”

Nathan Zuckerman silently observed the perfectly in-sync Commander and his assistant as he served tea. Kishiar, sipping the fragrant brew, smiled enigmatically.

“Let’s wrap up this and the Star of Nagran issue within a week and then depart. How does that sound?”

“A week seems too long.”

“Really? What do you anticipate?”

“Their urgency could make it possible for us to finish even in three days, if we play our cards right.”

“Hmm. Excellent. That’s the most thrilling line I’ve heard today. Let’s see how it unfolds.”

As Kishiar stirred his tea and winked, a soft tapping sound emerged from somewhere. A messenger bird, with a small cylinder tied to its leg, was pecking at the windowpane.

Nathan Zuckerman, with long strides, opened the window to retrieve the cylinder. Unraveling the small note inside, the knight’s expression grew serious.

“An urgent message from Dawn Palace.”

“From Dawn Palace?”

Kishiar promptly opened it. He quickly grasped the contents, his eyes lowered and let out a soft hum.

“An expected event has occurred.”

“What’s happened?”

“It seems the sage and his group and Nahan and his brothers have finally met in the capital. Of course, the conversation wasn’t exactly peaceful.”

Yuder’s expression instantly returned to its usual sharpness.

“…Was there an incident?”

“If this report is accurate, a building has been half-destroyed. Fortunately, the Cavalry was already monitoring the area, so they responded quickly. His Majesty believes the damage won’t be significant.”

The conflict between the sage and Nahan was not new; it had existed in Yuder's previous life. He had anticipated such an event the moment he heard that the sage had aligned with the Crown Prince and Duke Diarca, and Nahan had come to the capital.

The only difference was that in his previous life, their conflict had escalated in the South, not the capital.

'In my previous life, the real sage wasn't active in the capital. Nahan's presence was also unknown to the Cavalry.'

Back then, before they could fully pursue their true goals, they likely annihilated each other in internal conflicts, confined to their southern stronghold. However, this time was different, leading to this change in events.

It was a relief that the Cavalry had prepared and handled the situation well, but Yuder couldn't help worrying about potential casualties.

"Did His Majesty mention anything else about the Cavalry's situation?"

"It seems the message was sent right after receiving the report of the incident. There's no additional information. We might receive more soon."

"…"

Yuder wasn't used to just waiting for news about troublemakers. He had always been at the center of important events or had quickly thrown himself into action. Being a mere spectator was a novel, somewhat uncomfortable experience for him.

Yuder briefly wondered if he should have stayed in the capital, but he quickly shook his head, dismissing the unnecessary worry.

Neither he nor Kishiar had nurtured the Cavalry to be weak. They had deemed it strong enough to entrust their backs to, which is why they had ventured this far.

“Are you worried?” Kishiar asked, seemingly reading his thoughts. Yuder pondered for a moment before shaking his head.

“It would have been better if I were there… but I prepared for my absence, so it’s fine.”

“Right. Command inevitably requires patience.”

“Still, it bothers me a bit, not being able to do anything.”

Kishiar gently tapped Yuder’s hand.

“When you observe from the farthest and highest point, only then can you truly discern the entire layout of the board. Waiting for the pieces to move and yield results might feel like doing nothing, but to do otherwise would leave a leader unable to read the board and plan the next move.”

After saying this, Kishiar fell silent, giving Yuder time to ponder his words.

“So, it’s not that we’re doing nothing; we’re actually fighting together for what comes next. Thinking of it this way should ease any unnecessary worry and impatience.”

It wasn’t a state of inaction; it was a time of fighting together for the next step.

Yuder found this analogy to strategy games profoundly enlightening, dissolving any lingering restlessness like melting residue.

He looked down at Kishiar’s fingers on his hand and nodded.

“You’re right. I understand.”

“Good. Then let’s make use of our time to assess the situation and prepare for the next move until the next news arrives from the capital.”

At that moment, a knock on the door was followed by the announcement of a visitor seeking the Cavalry Commander. It was a timely re-visit from the First Princess of Herne.

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Chapter 698

As if on cue, the sound of a knock at the door announced the arrival of a visitor seeking the Commander of the Cavalry. It was a timely re-visit from the First Princess of Herne.

“The promised time has elapsed. Have you concluded your one-day deliberations?”

No sooner had she entered than the First Princess, Myra El Herne, removed her face-covering garment and immediately addressed the matter at hand.

“Indeed, I have.”

Kishiar’s response was leisurely and without urgency, causing a slight tremble in Myra’s eyelashes. Although her face appeared as calm and composed as it had been the day before, she couldn’t perfectly hide her inner tension.

Seeing this, Kishiar, with a slight smile, slowly continued.

“The Cavalry considers the Princesss proposal to…”

“…”

“Cooperate… Wait, may I have a moment? My throat is dry, and I need to moisten it.”

Myra’s eyebrows moved dramatically, barely suppressing her incredulous and absurd feelings, as the ends of her tightly pressed lips trembled.

‘She must be thinking were playing games with her.’

And to some extent, it was indeed a playful act. Yuder cast a fleeting glance at the clenched-fisted Princess, exhaling briefly.

After leisurely sipping his tea, Kishiar finally gave the answer she awaited.

“We shall accept your proposal.”

Only then did Myra’s face brighten. She quickly returned to her cold demeanor, nodding her head in an attempt to hide her relief.

“A wise decision, indeed.”

“However, there is a condition.”

“What might that be?”

“Firstly, in dealing with your troublesome matters, we’ll need the assistance of the Imperial Army’s Special Forces, in addition to the Cavalry. It would be appreciated if you could prevent any resulting disturbances from your side.”

“You mean the Imperial Army unit that assisted in this matter?”

“Exactly. Will that be difficult?”

Myra shook her head.

“I am aware that the Lord of Charloin has long harbored animosity towards the Imperial Army. However, he isn’t particularly fond of me either. That won’t be a problem.”

“Good. Ah, and one more thing.”

His red eyes sparkled with a hint of amusement.

“We’ve been seeking information about a certain Southern merchant group that has been active in the South for quite some

time. As the future ruler of the South, you should be able to obtain such information more easily than us, right?”

The real crux of the matter was this. The request for the Imperial Army’s involvement was merely a pretext, a side issue to the main point.

‘But to Princess Myra, this will seem like the less important issue.’

Myra, slightly furrowing her brow, asked.

“Is this matter related to our current endeavor?”

“It is. We’ve learned something in the course of our investigation.”

It was not a lie.

“Then I will certainly help.”

This way, Myra would be less aware of the true nature and risk of her investigation subjects. They could exchange the necessary cooperation without sharing too much detailed information about their intentions or knowledge.

Myra’s easy acceptance of all conditions was a result of Kishiar’s masterful delay of his response, twice.

Once for a day of deliberation, and once with a momentary cough. But to the waiting, these delays were enough to induce anxiety. Myra, though not exactly a novice in such matters, was still inexperienced in these games. And Kishiar La Orr was naturally gifted in using subtle actions and words to exploit vulnerabilities and sway hearts.

Following their agreement, Kishiar and Myra sat down properly to swiftly discuss the details of their forthcoming collaboration. Despite appearing as carefree and thoughtless as Duke Peletta himself,

Kishiar spoke flawlessly, leaving Myra simultaneously in awe and tension.

‘He truly is an enigmatic person…’ Such was her thought.

Originally, she had planned to first devise and convey all strategies once their collaboration was confirmed. However, she soon found herself unexpectedly discussing plans for resuming the search of illegal betting rings that very evening.

“That should cover it. If there’s anything you don’t understand, feel free to ask.”

“No, I’ve understood everything.”

Myra’s gaze drifted towards the clock on the table. She hadn’t mentioned needing to leave early due to her clandestine departure, yet the conversation had concluded precisely within an appropriate timeframe. It seemed coincidental, but Kishiar’s timing was curiously exact.

“Then, I entrust this matter to you.”

“And I, to you…”

With these words, Myra exhaled deeply, her face slightly relaxed.

“I was a bit worried when I heard the Second Prince visited last night, fearing our meeting today might not even commence. I’m pleased we could collaborate. Thank you.”

Her words were without ulterior motive, simply stating a fact.

Yet, strangely, at that moment, the relaxed atmosphere became tensely frozen.

Before a puzzled Myra, Kishiar exchanged a meaningful look with his assistant and spoke quietly.

“I’m not sure what you mean by the Second Prince visiting last night. No one from the Herne family came here before your arrival today.”

“What? But I clearly heard that…”

As Myra continued, her expression shifted to one of confusion.

Suddenly, a frantic knocking came from outside.

“Commander, it’s an urgent matter.”

“What’s the issue?”

The fact that someone had interrupted despite knowing of the guest indicated an emergency as serious as a siege on their headquarters. Kishiar gestured to halt the conversation and, seeking permission, immediately opened the door. Kurga entered with a stern face, quickly apologizing for disrupting the Commander’s work before starting his report.

“A few hours ago, a body was discovered behind the southern branch building. It appears the identification found on the body belongs to the Second Prince of the Herne Duchy.”

Myra, the First Princess, who had just been discussing the Second Prince, paled noticeably.

“The situation is being assessed, and knights from Charloin and the Herne family have been dispatched here. It seems they suspect he was murdered at this location. They are requesting a meeting with you, Commander, to authorize an investigation.”

‘Impossible.’

Yuder instinctively felt this was a plot targeting the Cavalry.

‘Who could it be? Who would suddenly kill the Second Prince of Herne and implicate the Cavalry…’

As he pondered, a grave and unsmiling Kishiar rose from his seat.

“As mentioned earlier, we have never encountered the Second Prince, but if his death is certain, we must investigate as well. First Princess, can you stand?”

“…Of course.”

Myra’s face remained ashen, but she stood up without anyone’s assistance.

“Meeting with the investigators could be problematic. What shall we do?”

“…My visit here was a secret to others, but that doesn’t mean I’ve engaged in any dubious activities. I will cooperate.”

“Very well. As we leave, let’s share what we know about the Second Prince’s whereabouts. Everyone, follow along.”

Kishiar began to stride ahead, the previously light atmosphere of the corridor now vanished. Yuder clenched his fist tightly as he walked.

“Are those the knights who requested the investigation?”

“Yes.”

At the forefront of the knights, who had entered to request an investigation, was a man with the Herne family crest emblazoned on his chest. They greeted with politeness, though not warmth, but paused upon spotting the First Princess standing behind Kishiar.

“To meet the Duke… First Princess?”

“Yes, it’s me.”

Myra responded with a stern face.

“Why are you here?”

“I came to discuss matters with the Cavalry concerning Melvin, who was captured here.”

Instead of revealing her true purpose, Myra mentioned the reason she had initially given Kishiar on her first visit. Melvin was one of the foolishly captured VIPs at the Nukijo fighting ring and a relative of hers.

“We hadn’t heard anything about that when we were dispatched here…”

“Do I need to report my every movement to someone, Sir Radel?”

The knights flinched slightly at the Princess’s bold and sharp retort. Yet, the middle-aged knight leading them kept scrutinizing her as if he believed her words to be false.

“…Of course not. Understood.”

“Hmm. If the greetings among family members are over, may we proceed to the main issue? What exactly happened?”

Kishiar inquired. The knight addressed as Sir Radel bowed lightly and began to speak.

“The Second Prince of Herne, Lord Ashrav, left last night to visit the Cavalry’s southern branch and hasn’t returned. A few hours ago, a ghastly body was discovered nearby, and Lord Ashrav’s identification was found on it. The news was relayed through the local law enforcement and the knights of Charloin to our family, and we were dispatched for confirmation.”

“And?”

“Upon examining the body, it was indeed the Second Prince. And on his body were… peculiar wounds that couldnt have been made by either a sword or magic.”

Wounds that couldn’t have been inflicted by sword or magic.

Everyone grasped what that implied.

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Chapter 699

“Upon examining the body, it was indeed the Second Prince. And on his body were… peculiar wounds that couldnt have been made by either a sword or magic.”

Wounds that couldn’t have been inflicted by sword or magic.

Everyone grasped what that implied.

The knights were certain that these wounds were inflicted by the abilities of an Awakener. Combining this with the location where the body was found and the fact that the Second Prince had intended to visit the Cavalry the previous day, the conclusion seemed obvious.

Therefore, we seek permission to search this area for traces of the Second Prince and the perpetrator, they declared, their faces leaving no room for refusal.

Yuder observed the knight’s rigid expression and pondered.

‘Rejecting their request in such circumstances would indirectly admit the Cavalry’s involvement. We must agree, but still’

The thoughts that had just passed through Yuder’s mind were voiced aloud by Kishiar.

First, allow me to express my condolences for the unfortunate fate that has befallen the Second Prince of Herne. The Cavalry will naturally cooperate in seeking justice for him. However, before requesting a search, isn’t there something obvious that should be done first?

A sly smile spread across Kishiar’s face as he gazed at the knight.

As the Commander of the Cavalry is present, it would be proper to meet with us first and hear our side of the story from last night, before making any search requests. Do you already have evidence that the Second Prince definitely set foot here, and Im the only one unaware of it? Or did you decide my words are unnecessary for your search? Either way, this is quite disappointing.

Indeed, this was what had irked Yuder.

If the Second Prince was found dead on his way to the Cavalry, it was only logical to first question Kishiar and the other members before requesting a search. Skipping this step and proceeding directly to an internal search was nothing short of disrespecting the Cavalry.

The knight's face betrayed his awkward realization upon hearing Kishiar's words, acknowledging their hasty approach.

"This was not our intention, Duke Peletta," he hastily clarified.

"I am standing here as the Commander of the Cavalry. Please address me accordingly."

"…Understood, Cavalry Commander. We hastily assumed that the Prince visited here last night, based on the testimony of his servants. However…"

The knight hesitated before continuing.

"We were anxious because the servants and horses that accompanied the Prince have yet to be found. We thought their traces might still be here. If they are still alive, we must act quickly. But indeed, I admit my haste was inappropriate and I apologize."

Confronted with a Kishiar different from the one known through rumors, the knight seemed to finally grasp the rising influence of the Cavalry. While the apology wasn't entirely satisfactory, Kishiar

decided to accept it, considering the knights reasoning. If the servants and horses were still missing, prioritizing a search over an investigation was not unreasonable.

Kishiar nodded in agreement.

“Very well. I accept your apology. Let us then assist in the search together.”

Knights with stern faces entered and began inspecting various areas of the headquarters. The members of the Cavalry, the Imperial Army, and volunteers, who were busy with their duties, initially looked on in wonder but soon disregarded the intrusion, recognizing Kishiar and Yuder standing firm behind them. Their adaptability was impressively swift.

However, as Sir Radel traversed the stables, storehouse, annex, and other old buildings without finding any unfamiliar people or horses, his expression gradually darkened.

“Hmm. I had thought perhaps someone might have entered the headquarters without our knowledge, but… it appears there are no significant traces to be found,” mused Kishiar, shrugging as he gazed at the empty backyard.

“Are you truly saying the Second Prince did not visit here?”

“That’s right. Since we closed the gates last evening, not a soul, not even a mouse, has come through. Why would I lie about such a matter? If you’re skeptical, I might as well tell you everything we did last night. First…”

Kishiar effortlessly recounted their activities to Radel. After closing the gates and ceasing to receive official visitors, Kishiar had dinner, checked on accumulated work, spent time with Yuder, observed the interrogation of those caught in the underground fighting ring, took a bath, and then went to sleep.

“All these activities were witnessed by others, so I can bring forth as many witnesses as you wish. Oh, and of course, you might want to investigate the schedules of others too. Who are you curious about? My adjutant? My assistant? The head of the southern branch? Or maybe the guards at the gate?”

“No, thats not…”

“Let me start with my assistant, Yuder Aile, who is a genius with both outstanding abilities and beauty and who spends the most time with me…”

Radel, delayed in his response, found himself swiftly inundated with detailed accounts of not only Yuder and Nathan Zuckerman, but also Kurga and every other member present.

Radel must have felt a mix of awe and discomfort, but not as much as the nearby members who overheard everything.

“Wait… how did you know I sneaked down to the dining hall last night and stole three loaves of bread?! I was sure no one saw me…”

“Hold on, Commander! Why would you mention in front of Yuder that I pretended to go to the bathroom to escape the evening training…!”

“Please, no more…!”

“…That’s enough! Now I understand that you and the others did not see the Second Prince yesterday.”

“Really? Just hearing it is enough?”

“Yes! Thats sufficient. If I need more, I will verify it myself!”

Radel exclaimed hastily. While Kishiar nonchalantly offered to reveal more if desired, Yuder noticed several knights approaching

The First Princess Myra.

Each bore the crest of Herne on their chest.

“Princess Myra, why were you here, really? Did your activities and destinations yesterday, which you kept secret, have anything to do with this place?”

Their voices sounded concerned, suggesting they were knights loyal to Myra.

“I told you, I came here because of an idiot relative.”

“That’s a relief, but with what happened to the Second Prince, people will start misinterpreting your intentions.”

“Did you happen to cross paths with the Second Prince?”

“Not only did I not meet him, but since arriving in Charloin, we haven’t even spoken. You know we stayed in different lodgings, don’t you?”

“Indeed, that’s the case…”

Yuder had already heard this information. It was one of the details Princess Myra had shared with them while descending to this place, upon hearing of the Second Prince’s death.

According to her, as soon as she and the Second Prince learned that the Nukijo fighting arena had been destroyed and a young relative of their house had been captured, they had both hurried to Charloin, choosing separate residences. Though staying separately, they had a rough idea of each others intentions through their informants.

‘I came to the Cavalry under the pretext of finding a way to rescue Melvin, keeping it a secret from others. The Second Prince

surely knew what I was actually planning to do. I too had heard shortly after he said he would visit the Cavalry. That's why I was worried while meeting Duke Peletta yesterday.'

Thus, Myra had naturally assumed the Second Prince would have met Kishiar secretly under the cover of night and then returned to his lodging.

I didnt hear about Ashrav returning to his lodging… But I didn't think it strange, as I dont receive reports about such details.

Thats how it was. But the Second Prince did not come to us yesterday.

Kishiar succinctly stated their position. Myra could doubt as much as she wanted, but she chose to believe their words.

"The timing is just too unfortunate. Why would such an incident happen now of all times…"

One of the knights, casting a glance at Radel, sighed heavily.

The knights' somber faces seemed to confirm their belief that this incident would negatively impact Myra as well.

'If the Second Prince is dead, isnt Myra the only remaining heir? Why such a reaction?'

Despite sensing their gloomy demeanor, Myra was not intimidated. With a furrowed brow, she straightened her back and spoke clearly.

"The most important thing now is to clearly determine why and how Ashrav died. I dont want to act considering whether this event could be advantageous or disadvantageous to me. So, I understand the suspicions Sir Radel has shown towards me, and I will fully cooperate with the forthcoming investigation."

“First Princess…”

The knights’ expressions darkened and then solidified with resolve. Yuder, having inadvertently overheard their conversation, sensed the deep respect Myra commanded among her people.

“Then, it seems there is nothing more to be found here. How about this? We proceed to where the Second Princes body was found and assist in the investigation?”

At that moment, Kishiar made a proposal to Radel.

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Chapter 700

“Then, it seems there is nothing more to be found here. How about this? We proceed to where the Second Princes body was found and assist in the investigation?”

At that moment, Kishiar made a proposal to Radel.

“Really? But the Cavalry…”

“Yes. In such situations, it’s standard practice to restrict the movement of those under suspicion until the matter is resolved. But, coincidentally, if it’s true that the Second Prince was killed by an Awakener, our Cavalry would be the first to investigate. Had this special circumstance not occurred, the Second Prince intending to visit the branch would have already happened.”

Radel and the knights fell silent, acknowledging the truth in Kishiar’s words.

“If it’s true that the Second Prince was murdered by an Awakener, there’s no better place than ours to investigate this quickly. Moreover, as you said, a swift investigation into the still undiscovered servants or horses would be ideal. So, I propose that the Cavalry ‘assist’ you in the interest of quick resolution and maintaining our respective dignities.”

This meant that the Cavalry wanted to clear their name, while Herne and Charloin sought the truth, each taking a step back to cooperate.

‘Truthfully, the Cavalry has nothing to fear. We could just wait until everyone gives up and our innocence and right to investigate are returned… but it would be hard to quickly find out who’s behind this mess.’

They never planned to stay here long in the first place. They didn't want to waste time. Kishiar, sharing Yuder's sentiments, grinned knowingly.

"I personally find this incident, aimed at striking both the Herne family and the Cavalry, exceedingly distasteful. So, I'm looking forward to a good decision."

"Its difficult for me to decide on my own. I need to discuss this with my companions before deciding," Radel responded.

Radel and the knights gathered, whispering quietly. Regardless of their efforts to speak softly, Kishiar, Nathan Zuckerman, and Yuder, who slightly used the power of wind, couldn't miss a word.

Many are worried this might be a trap by the Cavalry. Some see this as an opportunity to let Cavalry handle the investigation while they simply wait for the results

Then, Kishiar signaled Nathan Zuckerman, who discreetly disappeared.

"Ah… After discussing, we've decided to accept the Cavalry Commander's proposal. However, since the incident likely involves Cavalry, if anything related is discovered…"

"Of course. But there is a third party that can offer appropriate mediation and assistance between us, isn't there?"

"Really?"

As the conversation didn't flow as Radel and the knights expected, they were caught off-guard when someone hurriedly approached from behind.

"I apologize for being late. I was in communication with General Gino upon receiving news of this incident…"

The newcomer was Sunz, the leader of the Empire's Awakener Brigade.

His timely arrival, along with Nathan Zuckerman returning to his original position, confirmed he had been brought in at just the right moment.

Sunz introduced himself confidently in front of the knights, who looked at him with mixed feelings.

"I am Sunz, leader of the Southern Army's Awakener Brigade. I've heard all about the unfortunate incident involving the Second Prince of the Herne family. As the Empire's forces guarding the south, all of whom are Awakeners, it is only right for us to assist in finding the perpetrator."

"A unit entirely composed of Awakeners…?"

"Are you the Imperial soldiers who intervened in the recent arena betting incident?"

"That's correct. While we are not yet a formal unit, General Gino of the Southern Army's headquarters, upon hearing the news, has given us permission to use the unit's name to assist in the investigation."

Sunz presented a brief letter from General Gino, with the general's own seal clearly stamped upon it.

The knights, who had been scouring the southern branch in their search, knew the Imperial Army had seen their unit. It was only natural that Sunz had reported this matter to the general as soon as he heard the incident.

Remembering that the Southern Army's headquarters was not far from Charloin, and that rapid communication was possible through courier birds, the knights' expressions turned grim.

“My unit members were also present here yesterday and today. Therefore, I believe we are well-positioned to make sound judgments and offer assistance in this situation.”

Had they been just ordinary Imperial soldiers, the offer might have been declined. But Sunz’ unit was not the Cavalry, yet potentially a third party capable of substituting for some of Cavalry’s functions.

Although some classify General Gino as an imperialist, he is more renowned for being exceptionally neutral and honest. A Swordmaster who didn’t chase glory but had held his position as a Southern Army general for decades, he was a living legend in the Empire. All the knights realized that dismissing his letter and his subordinates would be unwise.

Intending to take the lead instead of just accepting the Cavalry’s assistance, Radel frowned as he considered Sunz’s proposal.

“Indeed, if your entire unit is Awakeners and directly under General Gino’s command, as the Duke has suggested, your assistance could be invaluable in this matter.”

“Right? Then let’s not delay any further and depart at once.”

“Understood.”

If Radel had been foolish enough to openly protest or object to the proposal, like an imperial guard might, Yuder had planned to intervene. But that was unnecessary. It was slightly disappointing, though, that Radel kept pondering, clearly troubled by his loyalty to the Second Prince.

‘Had his attitude been just a bit more insolent, I would have made his journey less comfortable.’

Unfazed by thoughts that would have horrified Radel, Yuder followed Kishiar, creating a slight breeze around them to ensure privacy before speaking.

“Did you involve Sunz because of his abilities?”

“That’s part of it. His abilities are the fastest and most useful in this situation.”

“It’s unfortunate Kanna isn’t here.”

Yuder saw that Kishiar’s reason for involving Sunz wasn’t just to have a third party; it was more about naturally drawing in someone whose vision ability was most beneficial in the current situation.

However, as exceptional as Sunz’s vision ability was, it couldn’t compare to Kanna, who could read even invisible information. They hadn’t anticipated this situation, so Kanna’s absence was regrettable.

The capital and the south were not nearly as close as Charloin and General Gino. Even if they sent Kanna immediately on a swift Misty Wind Horse, it would take nearly two weeks to arrive.

‘No. Considering Kanna’s health and stamina, even two weeks is optimistic. Humans need regular rest and nourishment…’

The best course of action, then, was to gather items that could serve as clues during the investigation, send them to Kanna, and wait for her response.

To uncover anything of value, we must take corresponding action. Let’s see who dared to commit such a brazen act.

The body of the Second Prince lay within the confines of the Charloin Security Force station, an area restricted to a very few. As they entered, the stench of decay struck their nostrils.

Myra, the First Princess, had insisted on coming despite advice to the contrary. She now stood with a handkerchief pressed to her mouth, clenching her teeth to suppress the urge to vomit.

“I’ll remove the covering.”

One of the knights, their face masked with a cloth, peeled back the black shroud covering the body. Yuder approached unhesitatingly, examining the exposed state of the corpse.

The Second Prince bore a striking resemblance to Myra, particularly the bright platinum hair. But beyond that, the resemblance was difficult to discern due to the horrific state of his body, covered in wounds.

‘Many marks resemble burns from lightning. Other than that, what stands out is that the bones are broken and marks are left on the skin, as if a large hand had been squeezing and opening them.’

“These injuries are beyond the capabilities of a knight or a mage.”

“That’s true.”

“But seeing it in person makes it even more evident.”

Yuder turned his head, gazing impassively at the others.

“This is not the work of anyone in our Cavalry.”

A moment of silence swept through the room.

“If you’re so certain, then…”

“There is no Awakener in the Cavalry capable of inflicting such wounds.”

“But couldn’t someone have hidden their true abilities? Or there might be an accomplice from outside…”

“Well, that might be true for the accomplice, but you seem unfamiliar with Awakeners.”

Yuder stepped closer to the body, lifting a hand marked with thin, black scars resembling burns from lightning. While the knights, more accustomed to dealing with corpses, frowned in unison, Kishiar, the Cavalry members, Sunz, and Emon remained comparatively composed.

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Chapter 701

“Well, that might be true for the accomplice, but you seem unfamiliar with Awakeners.”

Yuder stepped closer to the body, lifting a hand marked with thin, black scars resembling burns from lightning. While the knights, more accustomed to dealing with corpses, frowned in unison, Kishiar, the Cavalry members, Sunz, and Emon remained comparatively composed.

“Awakeners with more than one ability are nearly nonexistent. Even if they do exist, escaping the notice of myself, our Commander, or our comrades in the Cavalry is almost impossible, especially with such a powerful and conspicuous ability.”

“Hard to conceal, you say? Why? Can’t they just choose not to use it?” a knight sharply questioned, his tone laced with incredulity.

Yuder calmly responded, “The nature of an Awakener’s power makes it far more challenging to suppress than to use.”

This was a truth difficult to grasp for those non-Awakeners. However, the Awakeners present all shared understanding looks.

Once awakened, their power often manifested involuntarily, even at unwanted times. This held true for those whose bodies had undergone transformation and those with minimal abilities, like moving a mere droplet of water.

Learning to control their power was crucial, often prioritized over mastering its use or application. It was a major focus of the Cavalry’s continuous training.

Could a gushing spring, once breached, be entirely sealed with just a human hand? Certainly not.

Thus, an Awakener's prowess was often less about the raw strength of their power and more about the finesse in its control. This was why Yuder particularly esteemed the power control of Ever Beck.

"Completely concealing a power once possessed is an exceedingly difficult task. And the stronger the ability, the harder the control," he explained.

The numerous wounds marring the body of the Second Prince attested to this. The Awakener who inflicted them was clearly not skilled in controlling their power.

"The perpetrators didn't intentionally leave such severe wounds. They were incapable of using their power in any other way," Yuder surmised.

A display of power, uncontrolled and indiscriminate, likely instilled greater terror in onlookers. There seemed to be no perceived need for restraint. But there was a distinct difference between choosing to unleash such an attack and being limited to only that method.

And Yuder Aile was perhaps the best person to discern this difference.

"But I've heard rumors that there are those in the cavalry who can use multiple powers, even selectively choosing which to wield… If such a person exists, couldn't this scenario be possible?" inquired a knight who had been guarding the area where the corpse lay.

Unaware of Yuder's identity, he seemed to regard him as just another Cavalry member who had stepped forward first.

With Commander Kishiar standing guard in the background, the knight restrained from openly provoking conflict, instead choosing to express opposition to Yuder's statements, perhaps as a way to mask his disdain towards the Awakeners.

'When speaking such words, one might do well to consider that the person before them could be the very subject of the rumors they reference.'

Despite the news of Kishiar's appearance in Charloin presumably having reached them after that of Yuder, the way they were acting indicated a blatant disregard for the Cavalry. Yuder, gazing intently, was backed by Sunz, Emon, and the rest of his Cavalry comrades, all clenching their teeth and tensing their stomachs, making odd expressions. Their reason dictated that it was inappropriate to burst into laughter in the grave situation of inspecting a corpse.

Yuder spoke with an impassive face.

"It seems that I am the person you speak of, but to be honest, there's likely no one else quite like me."

"Really?"

The knight's retort sounded incredulous and arrogant. Yet, Yuder's cold eyes carried a peculiar commanding presence that brooked no contradiction.

In the brief silence that followed the knight's loss for words, Kishiar, chuckling softly, joined the conversation.

"That's true. My assistant, Baron Yuder Aile, can freely manipulate all powers of nature, and he is more knowledgeable than anyone about other Awakener powers. I won't deny the possibility that there might be another such person in the world… but well."

He tilted his head with a natural smile, genuinely pondering.

“If there were another such individual in the world, their shining talent would have stood out like the sun, immediately catching everyone’s eye. What does everyone think?”

“Exactly as the Commander says. If there were even one more person like Yuder, how could ordinary people like us even dare to join, fearing their presence?”

“Not a single one of the 48 soldiers in our Awakener Brigade, all Awakeners, possess two powers. Even within the Cavalry, where over 300 of the empire’s most capable Awakeners are gathered, those with more than two powers are exceedingly rare. Baron Aile can freely control four elements, not to mention his proficiency in weaponry and physical combat. Assuming such cases are common would hardly aid our investigation,” added Kurga, the head of the southern branch, his heavy sarcasm followed by a serious comment from Sunz, who intentionally emphasized ‘Baron Aile.’ His friend Emon also casually added his opinion.

“To be honest, your words sound no different than comparing a Swordmaster to a regular knight. If you believe that someone in the Cavalry who possesses and can effortlessly conceal more than two immense powers is the culprit, then you might as well directly accuse Baron Aile.”

“Oh, is that what you mean? So, you’re suggesting that as his superior, I ordered my assistant to murder the Second Prince?”

“Absolutely not!”

The knight hastily protested as Kishiar responded as if the thought had never crossed his mind.

The situation was rapidly devolving, threatening to wrongfully accuse Duke Peletta without any evidence, based on a mere slip of the tongue. The knight’s face turned ashen, prompting his comrades to step in.

“He’s merely unfamiliar with Awakeners and made a mistake out of concern. It surely wasn’t his intention. Please forgive him generously!”

Kishiar listened to the knights’ sweaty, frantic excuses for a long while before bursting into laughter, as if he were a carefree, irresponsible young man.

“Alright, alright. If you say it’s not the case, then it must be so.”

“…”

However, before the knights could fully relax, Kishiar, still smiling, added,

“I almost thought the Herne family had concluded that I was responsible for the Second Prince’s death. Be careful with your words. My body is very frail, you see. Especially my heart, so frail that too much shock could make me faint.”

The knights of the Herne family shifted their gaze to Kishiar, who stood a head taller and with broader shoulders than them. Regardless of their scrutiny, Kishiar simply continued to smile.

That smile no longer felt light or insignificant to the knights.

‘Just where does his sincerity end, and jest begin? It’s impossible to tell’

‘Ever since he became the master of the divine sword, has he changed?’

‘We mustn’t underestimate the Cavalry. Speaking carelessly could lead to trouble’

After Kishiar’s words, the knights refrained from further unnecessary disputes or questioning Yuder’s judgment. In the now

more sober atmosphere, Yuder was able to comfortably and swiftly complete his examination of the body.

“The Second Prince was likely attacked by at least two Awakeners. One with lightning abilities, and the other possessing the power to greatly enhance physical strength. It appears all the wounds were inflicted before death. That’s my observation. For the rest, I would like to request Captain Sunz here to take over.”

“Understood.”

Sunz, upon being nominated by Yuder, stepped forward with a tense expression. A faint, mirage-like power shimmered in his eyes.

“Hmm…”

“Do you see anything unusual?”

“There’s something… in the Second Prince’s stomach. Please, give me a moment.”

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Chapter 702

“Hmm…”

“Do you see anything unusual?”

“There’s something… in the Second Prince’s stomach. Please, give me a moment.”

Sunz narrowed his eyes in extreme concentration, squinting then widening them repeatedly. Yuder noticed the faint mist rising from his eyes intensify. Sweat trickled down his forehead, and his muscles tensed to the point of stiffness; finally, Sunz seemed to discern what he was looking for and exhaled deeply.

“Phew…”

“Is it over now?”

“Yes. I’ve confirmed everything I needed to see.”

Saying this, Sunz pointed lightly to the abdominal area of the Second Prince’s body.

“Here. Inside the Second Prince’s stomach, I saw several pieces of Seaweed and Charloa shrimp.”

“Seaweed and Charloa shrimp?”

The knights murmured among themselves. Myra, who had been covering her mouth with a handkerchief, also changed her expression oddly.

“Those from the south might be familiar, but Charloa shrimp mainly come from Charloin, recognizable by their unique head and

shell shapes. I could identify them only because of these features. They contain mild toxins, so they're not commonly used whole in cooking. Seaweed often consumed by commoners, but isn't quite fitting for someone of the Second Prince's status."

After this explanation, Sunz concluded with a sharp and careful expression.

"From what I see, the Second Prince's murder didn't occur near the Cavalry branch or its vicinity."

"Can you stand by that statement?"

"Couldn't the Second Prince have eaten those last night?"

"No, that's impossible. Ashrav didn't like seafood."

Myra's low, cold voice interjected among the murmuring knights. All eyes turned to the First Princess, who spoke for the first time since her arrival. She looked palely at the Second Prince's body and continued.

"Ashrav once fell severely ill from spoiled seafood as a child. Therefore, he never ate it in private, even if he might have in public. If he dined alone at his mansion, such food wouldn't have been served, especially something as dangerous as Charloa shrimp."

Then Myra commanded the knights.

"Summon the servants who attended to the Second Prince Ashrav last night. They should know what he ate. That will confirm everything."

"Understood. Bring the Second Prince's servants here."

The knights of the Herne family quickly brought in the Second Prince's servants. An elderly servant, who had been waiting for his

master in the mansion, entered in deep sorrow and was startled to see Myra.

“Princess Myra? Why are you here? Could it be…?”

“Don’t entertain unnecessary thoughts. Princess Myra is here only to assist in finding the murderer of the Second Prince. Do you remember what he ate last night?”

“Yes, of course.”

“Was it a seafood dish containing Charloa shrimp and Seaweed?”

“What? No, certainly not.”

The old servant shook his head quickly.

“Our Master Ashrav only had a light soup last night, feeling unwell. Even if he had a normal meal, he wouldn’t have touched such food, as he disliked seafood.”

Upon hearing the servant’s words, which precisely matched those of Myra, a silence fell over everyone.

According to the servant, the Second Prince had been in poor condition, having rushed to Charloin and thus depleted his strength. He had a weak digestive system and had opted for a digestible soup instead of risky seafood, which meant there should have been no remnants of seafood in his stomach.

Seizing the moment to strengthen his argument, Sunz spoke up.

“In truth, I thought… perhaps the Second Prince fell into the sea and swallowed them. The shape of what I saw was too intact to have been eaten as a cooked dish. Knowing now that he didn’t like seafood makes it even more certain.”

“But when found, the Second Prince’s body wasn’t wet.”

“Not being wet and not having been in the water are two different matters. Remember, it took some time to identify him after he was found. And consider the wounds on his body, seemingly caused by lightning-like abilities. Have you ever seen someone struck by lightning? They burn blacker than if set on fire.”

That explained the numerous black marks on the Second Prince’s body. Saying this, Sunz reached out and lightly touched the Second Prince’s hair, his fingers coming away with a white powder.

“I don’t know if they washed off the sea water after death, but I can still see traces. It looks like dirt, but it’s dried sea water. Tasting it would confirm, but…”

“That’s enough!”

The knights shook their heads with pale faces.

“If Captain Sunz’s words are true, then our next step is clear. We must search the coast where one could swallow Charloa shrimp and Seaweed.”

Kishiar spoke in a relaxed tone.

“To my knowledge, the nearest to the southern branch of the Cavalry is Sherpen Port. The fishermen of Charloin catch shrimp, clams, and Seaweed in their nets, don’t they? We should investigate if there were any signs of a person falling in or any suspicious activity. Kurga, and Sir Radel.”

“Yes!”

“…Understood.”

“Send five members each from the Cavalry unit and the Herne knights. Time is of the essence, do it now.”

Kurga and Radel simultaneously acknowledged and left. Kishiar surveyed those remaining, his gaze fixing on the Second Prince's servant.

"Thanks to the loyal servant of Prince Ashrav, we've gained much insight. What's your name?"

"Me? I… I'm Mujo."

"Good, Mujo. Can you tell us more about the Second Prince? We might need your help further."

The old servant, well-seasoned in noble houses, was taken aback by Duke Peletta's direct approach. He was unaccustomed to such high-ranking individuals behaving in this manner.

As he hesitated, Myra stepped in to reassure him.

"It's for Ashrav's sake, it's alright. Follow them. If you're concerned, I'll assign knights of the Herne family to accompany you."

"…"

Until yesterday, she had been a rival to his master. But now, with the death of the Second Prince, it would be foolish to hold any grudge against her. The old servant nodded, his expression complex.

"I understand…"

"Thank you, Princess Myra. Then let's move to another location. We can't continue here."

Yuder followed Kishiar, casting a final glance at the Second Prince's body.

Clutched in his fist, unbeknownst to the others, were a piece of cloth and hair strands he had covertly cut from the corpse earlier.

This should be enough for Kanna to decipher. I must send it back as soon as possible.

Kishiar's decision to send Radel ahead on the pretext of investigation had indeed been fortuitous. With the most vociferous among them gone, there was no one left to hinder their efforts.

After entering an empty room within the security force's station, Kishiar skillfully lit a fire in the magic stove. Nathan Zuckerman had disappeared momentarily, only to reappear with the curious sight of tea and a teapot.

As the air warmed, the atmosphere relaxed considerably. Kishiar began to converse with the tense, elderly servant, Mujo.

"What kind of person was the Second Prince?"

Asking first about the kind of person the Second Prince was, rather than his actions the day before, caught Mujo, Myra who had followed, and the knights of the Herne family off guard. Mujo struggled several times, his throat constricted, before slowly beginning to speak.

"Master Ashrav… he was a good man. My late wife was his wet nurse. He was somewhat frail, but had a strong spirit. Even when ill, he never showed it, always working diligently for the Herne family. That he would leave this world in such a way…"

Mujo bowed his head in sorrow, his shoulders trembling.

"I don't know who harmed the Second Prince, but this old man will never forgive them."

Silence followed for a moment. Kishiar gave him time to compose himself, then posed a few more questions. Each inquiry sought to understand the character and reputation of Ashrav, the Second Prince.

After softening the mood with these questions, Kishiar finally broached the main topic.

“I see. But actually… there’s a crucial piece of information we haven’t discussed yet. Who was the servant that accompanied the Second Prince yesterday?”

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Chapter 703

According to the knights, there was a servant who had followed the Second Prince. This servant, similar to the horse ridden by the Second Prince, had not yet been found and was presumed dead with high probability.

Upon hearing Kishiar's question, Mujo's expression darkened further. However, this darkness differed slightly from the sorrow shown when speaking of the Second Prince, whom he had raised like his own child.

"Ah… yes. That damned wretch hasn't been found yet either."

He responded with a cold demeanor.

"That man's name was Panajen. He was a newcomer, having joined the Herne family less than half a year ago. He had served our Second Prince for about the same duration."

From the perspective of an old servant who had served the Second Prince since childhood, a young servant who failed to properly attend to his master deserved death. However, it seemed that he had disliked Panajen from the beginning.

"A man with less than half a year's experience went alone with the Second Prince? He must have been highly trusted."

"Trusted? What… He just took care of the horse very well, that's why he was taken along."

"The horse?"

"Yes. Prince Ashrav didn't particularly enjoy horseback riding and always traveled by carriage. When he had to ride, he always took

that man with him. Yesterday was the same.”

However, there was likely more to it than that.

It was improbable that someone would select a servant with such little experience to accompany them simply because they cared for horses well. To Yuder’s observation, Mujo seemed displeased to admit that his master trusted Panajen more than himself. Whenever he spoke of Panajen, he wrinkled his nose, unable to hide his displeasure.

‘Dislike him or not, he should at least speak the truth.’

Yuder glanced at Kishiar. Catching his eye, Kishiar silently smiled and lightly waved his finger, signaling to wait a moment.

“He cared for the horse well… Yes, that’s a good trait. But isn’t that something anyone can do? What about other tasks? Was he competent?”

“No! He seemed to have no intention of learning anything. Recommended by someone, he ignored us and refused to talk, wandering outside every day and only pretending to work hard in front of Prince Ashrav. D*mned rotten tomato!”

“Oh, I see. That must have been hard.”

“Indeed, it was tough for everyone. Poor Prince Ashrav often believed him, but we thought that someday his true colors would be revealed.”

“Who recommended him? That place seems unreliable as well.”

“Well… I heard Young Master Milail of the Conche Barony wrote a letter of guarantee for his identity.”

At the mention of the Conche Barony, Yuder’s eyebrows twitched. Kishiar, noticing this, asked nonchalantly.

“Was the Second Prince close to them?”

“Baron Conche is a cousin of Duke Herne. Prince Ashrav and Young Master Milail weren’t particularly close, but they became friendlier after Prince Ashravs last year’s birthday. Perhaps that’s why someone like Panajen was introduced, to ensure comfortable horse riding.”

Indeed, it was Kishiar’s craft. With a cleverly probing statement, the old servant unwittingly revealed all about Panajen.

“That’s interesting. I’ve learned many things I didn’t know. Thank you for your help.”

“Oh, it’s nothing…”

The old servant, who had been speaking freely to the Cavalry and Duke Peletta, was suddenly startled, wondering if he had spoken too rashly. However, Kishiar, as if anticipating his concern, soothed him.

“The one who harmed the Second Prince is an Awakener, and thus it is our Cavalry’s responsibility to capture him. I promise we will apprehend him to ensure the Second Prince’s death was not in vain. If you recall anything unusual from last night, no matter how trivial, could you contact the Cavalry? I believe there’s no one who knows the Second Prince as well as you do.”

A servant who has lost his master is an entity no one cares about. Even if he had not served the Second Prince on the day of the incident, he would still be a sinner, not free from responsibility. In a situation where returning to the Herne family would only result in a severe reprimand and expulsion, Kishiar’s words deeply resonated with the old servant.

Knowing he should maintain his guard, Mujo nearly let it down in that moment toward Kishiar. After a long silence, he nodded.

“Understood…”

Taking advantage of the moment Mujo left under the knights’ escort, First Princess Myra, who had been sitting quietly, spoke up.

“Mujo is a stubborn man who follows only Ashrav, but you’ve managed to persuade him well.”

“I only showed respect for the deceased, as the Princess did for her brother. And since you are in a situation of having lost a family member, there’s no need to force yourself to stay strong.”

Princess Myra, as if pierced by his words, closed her mouth. Yuder, observing her crumbling facade, realized she, too, had just lost a sibling.

Though they were competitors for the heir’s position and guarded against each other, even to the extent of not sharing the same house in Charloin, Myra still acknowledged the Second Prince’s abilities and remembered even the minutest details of what he disliked. It was uncommon among nobility.

She might not show it, but certainly, Princess Myra was also swallowing shock and sorrow internally.

However, she quickly composed herself, her demeanor even more upright and her gaze firmer as she spoke.

“Thank you for your words, but I will not rest. I must catch the culprit and show unwavering strength before Ashrav’s funeral, so I don’t get entangled in useless talk.”

Her resolve could be seen as unbearably tough by some. Yet Kishiar withdrew gracefully with a smile.

“Strong and admirable. If that’s your decision, then I understand.”

“…”

“Anyway, given the situation, dealing with the troubles in the south must wait until after we find the one responsible for the Second Prince’s death. It’s unfortunate.”

“But your offer to cooperate still stands, right?”

Princess Myra reiterated their cooperative relationship. Kishiar nodded, and she promptly stood up.

“Understood. I’ll speak with the knights and return to learn more about Ashrav’s death. I’ll mention that my visit to the Cavalry yesterday and today was solely for Melvin’s exoneration, so please align with that.”

“Agreed.”

“If the Cavalry learns anything more about this, please contact me immediately.”

“Ah… Before you go, there is something I’d like to mention.”

Princess Myra blinked in surprise.

“Yes?”

Kishiar had just mentioned a missing servant, referring to the one spoken of by the servant Mujo. “Investigate the Conche Barony first, which reportedly sent that servant. Also, continue the investigation we requested earlier about the southern merchant.”

“I was planning to investigate the Conche Barony myself upon my return, but the southern merchant as well?”

“There seems to be a connection that’s piqued my interest.”

Princess Myra could not understand the connection, as there appeared to be none.

However, Yuder was not in the dark. The moment Kishiar spoke, he met the latter's gaze and thought.

'So Kishiar also made the connection immediately upon hearing that word.'

Earlier, the old servant Mujo, while talking about the missing servant, had used the word 'rotten tomato.' The term 'rotten tomato' was known to be a derogatory term used by people in the Southern part of the Empire against people of Southern countries or heritage. Anyone aware of this would have guessed that the missing servant was of Southern descent.

Hiring a servant of Southern descent in a noble house was not unheard of, but it was certainly not common. If not recommended by another noble house, it would have been unlikely for him to be hired.

And who had given that recommendation?

'Conche'

Upon hearing the name of the Conche Barony, Yuder, recalling his previous life, suddenly remembered the identity of the next Duke of Herne, which he had almost forgotten.

The previous Duke of Herne, not Princess Myra or her brother.

It was a person from the Conche Barony.

It was a family so insignificant and lacking presence that he had forgotten about them until now, but hearing it brought back the memories.

‘And coincidentally, we are currently pursuing Southern merchants who might be hiding somewhere in the south. A murder involving a servant from the southern countries and Awakeners It’s worth pursuing any potential connection.’

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Chapter 704

‘And coincidentally, we are currently pursuing Southern merchants who might be hiding somewhere in the south. A murder involving a servant from the southern countries and Awakeners It’s worth pursuing any potential connection.’

After Myra left, Kishiar, rather than simply waiting for those who had departed for the investigation, chose to briefly return to the Cavalry branch.

“Nathan, I shall return with my assistant. You go ahead to the location I’ve instructed.”

“Understood.”

Indeed, the carriage, occupied by just the two of them, was the ideal place for discussing matters not to be shared with others. As soon as Yuder boarded and confirmed that no one was around, he immediately relayed newly recalled information and his own speculations.

“I remembered from the previous game that a member of Baron Conche’s household had seized the title of Duke Herne. It seems right to suspect that they’re behind the Second Prince’s death, and it would be prudent to investigate considering the Southern merchants might be backing Baron Conche’s family.”

“That makes sense. I did notice an unusual reaction from you when Baron Conche’s name came up earlier.”

Kishiar rubbed his chin thoughtfully.

“When you told me about First Princess Myra from the previous game, I thought we should investigate those who might covet the

succession rights to prevent the same tragedy from repeating.”

“Yes, you did say that.”

“It’s embarrassing that the Second Prince passed away before I could properly finish my investigation. I managed to gather a list and some basic information about the families with legitimate claims to the succession. The Conche family was among them.”

It had only been a day since they had that conversation, so when had he found the time to conduct this investigation? Although it wasn’t complete, the important part was that Kishiar noticed the Conche family’s involvement.

Yuder listened intently, feeling a renewed sense of awe at Kishiar La Orr’s efficiency.

“The Conche family doesn’t have a significant presence within the Herne household. The current baron is the type to squander money, leaving them with little wealth, and they’re only given cursory recognition because of their close blood ties and being a collateral branch.”

Kishiar raised one corner of his mouth as if to ask if Yuder understood the implication.

“In other words, if First Princess Myra were to disappear and the succession passed to a collateral branch, the family would have no reason to support them. If they emerged victorious in the previous game, then the Second Prince’s recent death might just reveal the ‘reason’ behind their success. And if that reason is indeed related to the Southern merchants and their surrounding forces…”

“Then keeping an eye on Baron Conche’s family now would increase our chances of finding them or their traces.”

“Exactly.”

“In that case, I’ll go and investigate.”

Yuder immediately volunteered. He couldn’t be complacent, having seen a man capable enough to dodge Kishiar’s sword among those Southern merchants.

Given Kishiar’s position, needing to safeguard the Cavalry branch and the suspicion surrounding the Second Prince’s murder, he couldn’t afford to be away for long. Yuder thought it best for him to move discreetly.

He was prepared to persuade Kishiar if necessary, but to his surprise, Kishiar merely glanced at his expression and nodded easily.

“I thought you’d say that. You have my permission.”

“Thank you.”

“But go with Nathan.”

“…”

“That fellow has also seen the pinnacle of swordsmanship, so he won’t be a hindrance.”

Describing Nathan Zuckerman, a Swordmaster, as merely ‘not being a hindrance’ seemed insufficient, yet Kishiar did so with casual ease.

And then, Yuder finally guessed where Kishiar had sent Nathan Zuckerman just before their own departure.

‘…He had seen through my intentions even before we set out.’

Yuder looked at him, astonished, but Kishiar merely smiled.

“It’s still conjecture at this point, but I believe there’s a high probability that the Southern merchants are involved in this affair. Considering their previous long preparations to win over the heart of Duke Tain, it’s hard to be certain that they wouldn’t have tried something with the master of the South, Herne.”

“Yes.”

“They are indeed dangerous. But that’s not the only reason why I’m sending both you and Nathan.”

“…Then what other reason might there be?”

Usually, Yuder could guess Kishiar’s thoughts and intentions, but this time it was difficult.

As Yuder expressed his doubt, Kishiar’s red eyes darkened.

“If we can confirm their schemes this time, we gain additional information the certainty that they played the same hand in the previous game.”

“…”

“You’ve told me much about the previous game, but there was scarcely any information about them. That means they are almost an unknown enemy to you as well.”

Kishiar’s voice echoed quietly and deeply within the carriage.

“Unlike in the West where we were confident in shifting situations to our advantage because we hold informational superiority, this time is different. We have little information, and their purpose and intent are still not fully certain, so we can’t afford to let our guard down even slightly. In such a situation, it’s better to seek safety and find a way to securely protect the First Princess rather than take risks in scouting an unknown and cunning foe.”

Yuder too had made considerable efforts with the intelligence unit to dig up information on these Southern merchants since their encounters in the West. However, he hadn't thought as Kishiar did.

'But certainly… he's right.'

Yuder now fully understood why Kishiar had resorted to such a drastic measure as sending Nathan after himself for something as trivial as surveilling Baron Conche's family. It meant he didn't want to leave even a single chance for carelessness.

Yuder had twisted many parts of the future, saving those destined to die and achieving results that were never meant to be. Despite such extensive changes, some events still repeated themselves in different conditions, like the death of the Second Prince of Herne.

If the Southern countries' involvement meant that outcome was inevitable, then it was hard to be certain that the First Princess Myra could entirely escape it. It was a time when swift and reliable verification was needed.

"Here. Take this."

As Kishiar gave directions to Baron Conche's house, he handed Yuder a ring he had worn on his finger. It was a new ring, replaced after some of the magic tools used in the recent fighting arena had lost their power. Yuder noticed the barely discernible magic inscriptions intricately intertwined with the design on the inside of what seemed to be a plain silver ring.

"It's a communication tool that can be used about three times. Nathan has something similar, but having an extra one can't hurt."

As he said this, he casually waved his other hand, revealing a ring on his finger. The ring was different in color but almost identical in design to the other.

“These two form a pair, and if you stroke the inside three times, they will react to each other. Use it when you need to request assistance.”

“Understood.”

“Just in case, I must say, you absolutely must not get hurt. And… this.”

Kishiar then pulled something else out of his pocket. Before Yuder could reflexively take and examine it, Kishiar gently wrapped his fingers around Yuder’s, forming his hand into a fist. Yuder felt something crinkling inside his hand, but he couldn’t tell what it was.

“Check it after you get off. I’ll see you later then.”

“Please take care as well, Commander.”

The man, having heard Yuder’s parting words, smiled beautifully. Moments later, he pulled the carriage reins, signaling Yuder to disembark. The street was nearly deserted.

“Baron Conche’s mansion is at the end of this street, with the blue roof and three stories. Nathan should be around there.”

After watching the carriage depart for a moment, Yuder unfolded his fist.

Inside was a collection of candies wrapped in paper, similar to those he had seen before.

‘…When did he even manage to pick these up?’

He was sure they hadn’t been there when they left the capital, and it was a mystery where they had been kept.

Nevertheless, finding them unexpectedly pleasant, Yuder silently unwrapped one of the candies and popped it into his mouth. The

sweet taste moistened his tongue.

“Sigh…”

Though it felt a bit different than usual, it was still the proper start of what was to come.

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Chapter 705

“Sage, are you feeling alright?”

In a dilapidated house in the Seventh Wall District of the capital, young Awakeners, now reduced to three from five, knelt beside the Sage, worry etched on their faces. The Sage, with a wet cloth over his forehead and eyes, replied in a strained voice, “I am fine it’s just your well-being that concerns me.”

“Do not worry about us. This is nothing!” another chimed in.

Their number had dwindled; Langbarton and Ella had stayed behind to fend off Nahan, aiding their escape. Thanks to their sacrifice, the Sage and the remaining Awakeners evaded the pursuing Cavalry and took refuge in a house provided by Baron Renbow.

But their relief was short-lived. Upon arrival, the Sage had collapsed, and the other three suffered burns from Devran’s flame powers during their escape. Unable to contact Baron Renbow or return to the Crown Prince’s palace, their only option was to hide.

Without Nezo’s far-seeing ability and Juve’s power to shield a specific area, they would have been captured by the Cavalry. Diemon, with the least injuries, tended to everyone as best he could.

“I’m sorry My rash attempt to meet with Nahan has caused you harm,” the Sage lamented, causing their hearts to ache. In their minds, Nahan was a traitor, in league with the Cavalry, jeopardizing the Sage’s mission.

However, they couldn’t dwell on that. Nezo, adjusting his broken glasses, spoke gravely, “Sage Langbarton and Ella they’re dead, aren’t they?”

The Sage sighed deeply, and with evident difficulty, replied, “No, they are not dead.”

“Then”

“But they would rather die than speak of us, as they swore to me. Do you not remember?”

Nezo blinked, realization dawning, “Yes, I remember. They made that oath to you right before leaving. And then you were so drained that you could hardly stand”

They didn’t question how the Sage was so certain of Langbarton and Ella’s survival, nor did they realize that his collapse was more due to exhaustion akin to overusing his powers than the burns.

“So, we worry less about them now. It’s painful, but inevitable. What should we do next?”

“Once the number of patrolling soldiers decreases, one of you should contact Baron Renbow. He can reach out to Duke Diarca and His Highness the Crown Prince for help.”

Diemon, being the least injured, took on this task. Despite his fear, he couldn’t hide his excitement at being the only one they could rely on. Nezo and Juve frowned at his pleased demeanor, but the Sage quietly encouraged him.

“Diemon, you are the only one we can trust now. You understand, don’t you?”

“Of course, hehe. Just rely on me.”

Not long after Diemon had left, disguised in the garb of a pilgrim to conceal his striking appearance, Baron Renbow arrived in a flurry. He was shocked to the point of nearly falling backward upon seeing the Sage lying down.

“Sage! What has happened here? His Highness the Crown Prince has been extremely worried, as you have not returned to the Bright Palace for days. A room there was nearly destroyed, and a servant was seriously injured by shards of a broken mirror!”

“There was a little incident,” the Sage replied calmly, detachedly stating, “I was betrayed and injured by an old ally who joined forces with the Cavalry, preventing our return to the palace.”

Baron Renbow’s expression grew grave upon hearing this. “That explains it… There was an explosion in Fifth Wall District or somewhere, and His Majesty the Emperor has deployed the Cavalry everywhere, inspecting everyone entering the palace…”

After saying this, Baron Renbow glanced around with a slightly frightened look, lowering his voice, “Moreover, recently, I’ve felt like someone has been investigating me, which has been quite unsettling.”

The Sage’s expression changed at these words. After a long contemplation, he slowly spoke, “I intended to ask your help in entering the palace, Baron Renbow. But given these circumstances, it seems too dangerous to return.”

After a pause, the Sage inquired, “Is there a way to meet Duke Diarca first?”

Baron Renbow shook his head with a troubled expression, “The Duke wouldn’t meet anyone possibly involved in the explosion. I trust you, Sage, but he doesn’t. We haven’t yet succeeded in infiltrating our people into the Cavalry in the south, so how could he agree to meet…”

“Any method is fine, just once. Is it still too difficult?”

The Sage’s eyes faintly glimmered as sweat trickled down his forehead. Baron Renbow, after a moment of silence, nodded like a

puppet being pulled by strings.

“Actually, His Highness the Crown Prince recently reported to His Majesty about the Sun Palace intrusion, but all the suspects were released due to insufficient evidence, which greatly annoyed the Duke. I heard a rumor that he plans to take a brief tour with his youngest son to cool his head. The exact date is unknown, but it should be soon… Perhaps you could seize that opportunity.”

“A tour…” The Sage appeared to ponder over Renbow’s advice, considering it a good suggestion.

“Understood. Please inform me as soon as you have the exact date of this tour. And don’t worry about the plan in the south; we will start that immediately. Inform Duke Diarca of this. Understanding his and your concerns about the expansion of the Cavalry, we will do our utmost.”

“Sage, you always understand my heart. It’s a difficult task, but it’s worth undertaking together.”

“And please deliver this letter to His Highness the Crown Prince. It will help ease his troubled mind.”

The Sage produced a letter from within his clothes. The short letter, which did not reveal its author’s identity, was heavily scented with the fragrance of the sachet the Sage always carried. Those familiar with the Sage could instantly recognize the owner of that scent.

Baron Renbow, overjoyed, accepted the letter from the Sage.

The following day, Baron Renbow brought good news to the Sage. “Duke Diarca is setting out on his excursion this very evening. He plans to cool off by the lake in Fourth Wall District, where the evening sunset is beautiful.”

“Fourth Wall District, understood.”

“Ah, and… this is not good news, but… two of the Awakeners, who were arrested by the Cavalry at the explosion site, bit off their tongues and died yesterday. From the descriptions released, they seemed to be your followers…”

At these words, the atmosphere turned chillingly cold. The young Awakeners bit their lips to cope with the shock.

After Baron Renbow left, the Sage sat in sad silence for a long time. The three young Awakeners following him also mourned and seethed with anger over the deaths of their comrades.

“It’s all because of Nahan. If only we knew where he’s gone…”

“We’ve sent messages to our southern and central bases with Baron Renbow’s help. If he heads there, we’ll hear of it.”

“Don’t be too saddened. We’ll meet Langbarton and Ella in the sky one day. But Nahan… Yes. That’s also why I’m taking the risk to meet with Duke Diarca.”

The Sage quietly consoled them, revealing his inner thoughts.

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Chapter 706

“Don’t be too saddened. We’ll meet Langbarton and Ella in the sky one day. But Nahan… Yes. That’s also why I’m taking the risk to meet with Duke Diarca.”

The Sage quietly consoled them, revealing his inner thoughts.

As you all know, the person who actually has the power to protect us is not His Highness the Crown Prince, but Duke Diarca, who placed him in that position. The Duke is soon to become the one who holds everything in this Empire. He is renowned for his fairness, rewarding those with talent and loyalty regardless of their status.

It was a known fact that Duke Diarca, a man of remarkable skill, had been taking in common-born knights with nowhere to go and impoverished nobles, improving the image of his house. Recently, he had been working to fill the private army of the Diarca family with Awakeners. Although his motives were not entirely noble, the young Awakeners listening to the Sage were not concerned with that.

Even If everyone in this world turns away from our brethren and the Star of Nagran, as long as he believes in us, we can stand proudly and prove our innocence. Nahan will no longer be able to torment us.

Ah

If he stands with us, believes in our words, we need not hide anymore. Can you imagine our brethren, who have lived in fear, hiding from the Cavalry without committing any crime, emerging boldly from their strongholds to display their powers? Living happily in a safe, warm place?

Yes, I can imagine it… very well indeed.

Nezos eyes filled with tears, his expression overwhelmed.

If we overcome this trial, you will all become new pillars of this Empire, alongside its master. To see that day, I would gladly sacrifice this aged body.

Sage

For us, to go so far

Tearful voices surrounded the Sage, who smiled weakly, yet with a guardians kindness.

Now, don’t cry. Its tonight. We must hurry to Fourth Wall District by evening… for Langbarton and Ella.

For Langbarton and Ella!

As they cried out, the Sage lowered his eyes. His gaze was icy cold, contrasting the smile lingering on his lips.

—

Tap tap. Gakane peeked in through the open door, knocking softly.

Kanna, are you still busy?

Huh? No, not busy. I was just about to return to the base.

Kanna, who had been fervently writing, smiled broadly, putting a period at the end of her last sentence before standing up.

They were in a building gifted to the Cavalry by the Emperor during a party. Located near the base yet secluded, Kishiar had simply renovated it into a prison and investigation facility for Awakeners. However, it was quite different from a typical prison, having been converted from a mansion, it was exceedingly bright

and warm. Each holding area had bars and locks, but the facilities were so well-equipped that at a glance, it did not feel like a prison at all.

But, in truth, the entire building and its surroundings were thoroughly sealed using magic circles and the abilities of the members. Soundproofing and powers that dulled the perception of passersby were applied, making it impossible for ordinary people to even be aware of such a place.

And in Kishiar's absence, the person granted the authority to manage and use this building was none other than Kanna Wand, the Jung Deputy Commander.

It was assumed that the doors of this building would not need to be opened until Kishiar and Yuder returned. However, the unexpected explosion caused by the Star of Nagran forced an influx of individuals into the building, as the headquarters of the Cavalry lacked space. Kanna spent most of her time here, interrogating the captured awakeners.

Kanna asked her red-haired friend, who stood silently without stating his purpose, "What is it? Is there something you need?"

While she could easily discern Gakane's reasons with her abilities, Kanna chose not to use her powers for such trivial matters. After all, wasn't it for this purpose she had honed her ability to control her power?

"Just, I was nearby and thought it's about time for you to head back to the base… thought we could go together."

"Wow, you came to escort me? That's impressive, Gakane. Truly worthy of the praise you've received from His Majesty, Sir Bolunwald!"

“No, it’s not about being impressive. It’s right to prioritize your safety. The people here are still too dangerous… there’s a chance you could be threatened… And you’ve received the same praise before too…”

As Kanna giggled teasingly, Gakane protested, his face flushing with embarrassment. Knowing he had truly come out of concern for her safety, Kanna decided to cease teasing her good-hearted friend.

“Ah, right. Only a fellow initiate would do this. Thank you.”

‘Fellow initiate’ referred to the trio of Yuder, Gakane, and Kanna. While she was fond of all her colleagues, Kanna held a special affection for the other two, who had been with her since before the entrance test. Gakane felt the same.

“What were you writing there?”

Gakane glanced at the paper Kanna had been writing on, changing the subject.

“Names of dishes, places… There are some strange words here.”

“Oh, this? It’s the information I’ve gathered from the people here. There’s so much, I can’t keep it all in my head, so I write it down daily. When reporting, I extract only the important bits.”

Gakane was startled, realizing just how valuable the casually scribbled information on the paper was.

“I’ve written down today’s information, so now I just need to check on the people under Priest Lusan’s care before leaving. Want to come with me?”

“Ah, those people who had caused an uproar because they bit their tongues.”

“Yes, those people.”

Though referred to simply as ‘those people’, both knew exactly who they were.

They were the most important and peculiar individuals among those captured in the explosion. The names Kanna had gleaned from them were Langbarton and Ella. Though unconscious, Kanna’s exceptional abilities revealed that they were followers of the Sage.

That should have been enough, everyone thought. But not Kanna. She had sensed something odd in the information from Langbarton and Ella.

I keep being bothered by some strange information from these people. Before they lost consciousness… It seems like something crucial happened around the time of the incident.

To uncover this, Kanna pushed her abilities to the limit, to the point of nosebleeds. Finally, she succeeded in discerning a piece of information that seemed to be the key.

These people definitely encountered some kind of mental ability that day. Not Nahan’s illusions, but something earlier… a power that could influence something related to life.

And it seemed highly likely that this was related to the Sage’s brainwashing abilities. Having made this assessment, she summoned two members of the medical unit and then cautiously addressed the two who had just opened their eyes.

“You were followers of the Sage, weren’t you? Do you remember anything about what happened that day?”

Upon hearing these words, they suddenly bit their tongues and collapsed. There had been no warning, nor did they show enough vitality to be aggressive.

These individuals, who had barely been able to open their eyes and had not even the strength to speak, shocked everyone with their simultaneous actions. Fortunately, Lusan, whose divine power was unmatched by anyone, and Enon, whose past career was unknown but whose skill was suspiciously exceptional, were right there.

Enon quickly administered a medicine he had prepared in advance, opening their blocked airways. Lusan poured out his healing power to stop the endless flow of blood. Thus, they managed to keep the two's breaths tethered to this world once again.

It was not an overstatement to call it a victory for Kanna, who had delved into even the slightest suspicions without missing a beat.

Kanna stepped out of the space she had been occupying with confident strides. The corridor created by a Cavalry member capable of attaching something through an empowered medium, using a month's worth of energy, had connecting and separating paths that seemed unlikely to meet, making it easy to lose one's way when first arriving. But Kanna walked out without hesitation, eyes fixed ahead.

Upon reaching her destination and opening the door, Lusan, who was tending to the two lying on the bed, turned his head.

"Ah, you've come."

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Chapter 707

“Ah, you’ve come.”

“Yes, Priest. And what about Pharmacist Enon?”

“He is at the headquarters.”

Langbarton and Ella were still unconscious, their eyes closed. Gakane scrutinized their restrained forms, designed to prevent any self-harm, with a furrowed brow.

He had been investigating the whereabouts of the Sage outside when they had bitten their tongues, missing the horrific scene. Yet, the sight before him was enough to imagine the dreadfulness of that moment, sending a cold shiver down his spine.

Even in their unconscious state, the total absence of a certain vitality that should be inherent in any normal person was strikingly apparent, as if it had been completely drained away.

‘It’s evident that they were not in their right minds when they bit their tongues…’

Gakane, gazing down at them, opened his mouth to speak.

“…It must have been the Sage who brainwashed them into biting their tongues, right?”

“Probably.”

“It’s terrifying how just one ability can determine life and death. But why did they immediately attempt to kill themselves upon capture, unlike other Awakeners from the Star of Nagran?”

“Perhaps back then there was no need, and now there is. If someone recognizes them as frequent visitors to the Crow Prince’s palace, it could be disadvantageous. It’s about eliminating both the evidence and the witnesses.”

Lusan, having learned about the Sage during the treatment process, interjected. Kanna, agreeing with Lusan’s words, yet thinking like a true Awakener, offered a different perspective.

“Your words, Priest, are one reason, but I think differently. If killing them was more advantageous, the Sage would have already killed the other Awakeners from the Star of Nagran. But that hasn’t happened yet. I suspect… it might be a matter of whether or not the victims met certain conditions to trigger the Sage’s lethal ability.”

“Conditions to trigger the ability?”

To Gakane’s question, Kanna hummed, pondering.

“Gakane, you know I’ve been investigating those associated with the Star of Nagran, right?”

“Of course. Who else in the Cavalry knows more about them than you?”

“Right. After much scrutiny, I’m beginning to understand how the Sage’s abilities are activated. The fact that followers of Nahan were also captured this time was greatly informative.”

With that, Kanna made a request to Lusan and Gakane.

“Please keep what I’m about to say confidential. It’s still speculative, but I’d rather it not be discussed elsewhere.”

“Of course. I swear to god, I’ll keep it secret.”

“Same here. Um… Should I even refrain from mentioning it to the Commander or Yuder?”

Gakane, seeking something to compare to a divine oath, was met with Kanna’s laughter.

“No, if the Commander or Yuder ask, you should tell them. I’ll be reporting to them soon anyway!”

“Ha ha… Alright, everyone but the Commander and Yuder.”

“Anyway, from what I’ve deduced through my readings of the conditions of the Awakeners from the Star of Nagran, the Sage’s ability is definitely brainwashing. However, it’s not like the Sage can command anything at any time.”

“Oh… So there are limits to using the ability, just like us?”

“Yes. If the Sage could easily use brainwashing to the extent of causing death, people like Nahan wouldn’t have emerged, right? No matter how much trust there is, it’s rare for someone to die immediately upon being commanded to do so. An ability that overcomes the instinct to live requires immense power, and I believe it also necessitates certain preconditions.”

Though not as terrifying as the abilities of the Sage or Nahan, the Cavalry had several mental ability users. Kanna, as their leader, had a significantly higher understanding of mental abilities compared to other members.

“Mental abilities vary in effectiveness depending on the subject. You’ve faced Nahan yourself, Gakane, so you know that strong-willed individuals are less susceptible. However, under certain conditions, the power can exceed its usual limits. You understand this far?”

“Yes. So, what are these preconditions? Loyalty?”

“That’s part of it. But what comes next is more important.”

Kanna lowered her voice.

“I’ve been asking the Awakeners from the Star of Nagran about their first encounter with the Sage. Surprisingly, I found a commonality in their experiences. My guess is that the Sage used his ability at the first meeting.”

“Used his ability at the first meeting…? Openly brainwashing?”

“There was an unspoken rule that new Awakeners to the Star of Nagran must meet the Sage personally for their membership to be approved. After that, they received group norm training from the Sage, and only then were they assigned tasks according to their aptitudes.”

This detail was consistently mentioned by all who were part of the Star of Nagran. However, Kanna read something more covert that the storytellers themselves had not realized.

This insight was a result of her abilities taking a significant leap forward after recently thwarting invaders at the Sun Palace. Initially, her power only allowed random access to information from touched objects. Now, she could selectively extract specific types of information and reconstruct memories or thoughts based on the past information of the subject.

If pushed further, she could even glean a little information about a third party who had interacted with her target. Essentially, the ‘target’ acted as a kind of intermediary. However, this method was ineffective unless the third party had left a deep impression or a significant experience on the ‘target’.

In this case, all Awakeners of the Star of Nagran had such profound impressions and unique experiences with the Sage, enabling her to gather considerable information even indirectly.

“For a secret organization formed for survival, such a rule makes sense. But think about it. The Sage personally meeting and training every new Awakener without anyone else’s assistance… Considering his abilities, doesn’t that seem like an ideal scenario?”

“Indeed. There’s no better way to exert brainwashing than through teaching. It’s natural to believe and follow the words of a teacher.”

Gakane’s eyes grew serious. Kanna flashed a sharp smile.

“Exactly. Trust. According to the information I gathered, the Sage would always start the training by revealing that he too was a power user who had left his homeland and lived a hard life. He always used the same phrase with the new Awakeners. It’s the most famous quote about ‘faith’ from the Sun God scriptures.”

“Light does not change direction, and darkness comes to all. Amidst all fears, believe in those who forge ahead… the ‘Testament of Faith’ from Scripture, Chapter 3, Verse 98.”

Lusan, reacting to the mention of the scripture, promptly responded. Kanna declared it the correct answer.

“Yes.”

“The last words left by the Messenger Orhe before he returned to the sun. It’s a part particularly favored by priests leading groups because of its emphasis on believing in those who forge ahead.”

“Ah… I didn’t know that. But I do think that phrase started making people believe in the Sage.”

Before joining the Star of Nagran, the Awakeners, filled with distrust and guardedness from all their experiences, began to open up and believe in the Sage after hearing those words. After the

training, there wasn't a single person who resisted the idea that the Sage was benevolent and trustworthy.

Kanna continued, her face turning bitter.

"You see, brainwashing doesn't work if it's too complicated. What could be a simpler and more beneficial phrase for the Sage than 'trust me'?"

"That way, he could have brainwashed everyone in the Star of Nagran."

"Yes. Afterwards, those who seemed most affected by the brainwashing were filtered out during the training process and made into close aides, continuously strengthening the brainwashing."

According to what Kanna had read, apart from the phrase 'trust me', the Sage hadn't directly said anything universally common to the Awakeners.

"Thinking about it, the Sage probably had only one chance to brainwash each person. Strengthening an existing brainwash seems possible, but completely changing it seems not. For example… if someone was brainwashed to like roses, you could deepen it to make them swallow rose thorns, but suddenly making them like lilies instead seems impossible. Do you get what I mean?"

"I think so. It's like continuously strengthening the belief to the point of biting their own tongues, but not changing to believe in a different person… Maybe that's why the brainwashing didn't work properly on Nahan…"

Gakane's mind drifted to a previous argument he had heard between the Sage and Nahan.

"Maybe Nahan joined before the formation of the Star of Nagran and missed the training process, or perhaps he was brainwashed

differently in the early days. That could explain why the Sage couldn’t control him despite the chaos and didn’t use his powers.”

“Exactly, Gakane. You’re thinking just like me. Thanks for understanding.”

After saying this, Kanna looked down at Langbarton and Ella with a touch of regret.

“These people must have been brainwashed by the Sage repeatedly without their knowledge. Their faith, compounded over time, must have made them feel the Sage’s affairs as their own, or maybe even more important. That’s why they were used as shields by the Sage.”

“…”

“I don’t know how true my speculation is yet. But it’s something I can never forgive.”

Kanna clenched her fist.

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Chapter 708

“I don’t know how true my speculation is yet. But it’s something I can never forgive.”

Kanna clenched her fist.

“That’s why I asked for these people to be declared dead. That must be what the one who ordered to bite the tongue wanted. If we do as they wished, won’t they come out of hiding?”

“I see, so that was it.”

After Langbarton and Ella barely survived biting their tongues, the Cavalry publicly announced the incident, but with a twist: they reported that the two had died. Gakane recalled hearing about several communications between the three Deputy Commanders and the Sun Palace before this announcement was made.

Gakane, one of Cavalry’s most skilled members, was not a Deputy Commander. He lacked the authority to decide or even give an opinion on such major matters and didn’t know why the announcement differed from the truth until now.

‘Well, I had thought our Deputy Commanders had their reasons.’

Kanna, Ever, and Steiber had evolved into responsible leaders since their initial appointment. He believed they must have had a valid reason for their decision, one even the Emperor had approved.

With this confirmation, he felt reassured.

“It was troubling how well those people were hiding, making it hard to follow them. Thanks to you, Kanna, we might soon see results. Thank you.”

“Don’t mention it. Remember how I once used my abilities to read from the items you and Hinn brought from their lodging? Only those with abilities useful for hiding remain by the Sage’s side now. It’s naturally tough, but you, Gakane, have managed to track Nahan’s whereabouts following His Majesty’s command.”

Emperor Keilusa had tasked Gakane and intelligence members with this critical mission. With the help of Kanna and other skilled members of the Cavalry, Gakane successfully guessed the direction Nahan had headed.

“Yes… He left the capital without looking back and went south.”

Nahan had disappeared through the capital’s southern gate. Though it was early to conclude, Gakane felt he must have headed to the southern region.

“Having fully broken with the Sage, Nahan must feel the need to gather his supporters and declare independence. With the western base gone, he likely headed to the central or southern base.”

“If he went to the southern base, Yuder and the Commander might soon find him. That would be good.”

“Exactly. Nahan won’t escape if Yuder catches him, especially since he seemed unwell.”

Kanna and Gakane both thought of the last of their fellow initiate, a friend whose whereabouts never worried them, bringing a slight smile to their faces.

“Let’s head back now.”

“Yes.”

“Ah, you’re leaving already? Take care on your way back, and I hope to see you again soon.”

“Yes, Priest. Don’t overdo it yourself and return to the base early!”

After exchanging farewells with Lusan, they returned to their base, only to encounter an unexpected message.

“Gakane! Kanna! Both of you are here! There’s just been a message from the Sun Palace.”

Ever, who usually had a calm demeanor, approached them with a rare intensity in her expression.

“A message? What about…?”

To Gakane’s bewildered reply, Ever held up two fingers.

“There are two important pieces of news. The first is about an incident in Charloin, near the southern branch of the Cavalry, where the Second Prince of the Herne Duchy was murdered by an Awakener. Consequently, the Cavalry is now under significant suspicion.”

“Could it be that Nahan has already reached there?”

Kanna asked with a grave expression, to which Ever shook her head.

“That’s impossible. Hosanna, who can teleport, is right here with us.”

“Still…”

“Regardless, we can’t just sit back and trust that the Commander will handle everything. We must be ready to support the south at a moment’s notice. That’s an order.”

“Ah… What’s the second piece of news?”

Gakane inquired, prompting Ever to turn towards him.

“The second piece is that Baron Renbow, the noble under surveillance, is currently heading towards the outskirts of Fourth Wall District. His Majesty believes that the Sage might appear where this noble is. We have been ordered to select members skilled in stealth and disguise to follow him.”

“Ah, then I shall leave immediately!”

Despite having just returned from work, Gakane turned to leave without a word of complaint.

“Hold on, Gakane. Haven’t you forgotten that both the Sage and Nahan’s sides have seen your face before?”

“…Ah.”

Gakane halted abruptly. Watching his faltering steps, Ever smiled slightly.

“No, I don’t mean you shouldn’t go. Of course, we sought you out for a reason. Your Shadow Clone is an amazing ability, after all. But this time, you mustn’t take the forefront. Support the others discreetly with your Shadow Clone. Can you do that?”

“Of course! But who else will be going…?”

“Hinn and Finn, who haven’t been exposed yet, and those who recently passed the second recruitment and are about to become official members. Hinn and Finn are already waiting outside, and the others are…”

As she trailed off, her gaze shifted towards two figures who emerged.

“Hello…”

“It seems like it’s been a while since we last met, both of you.”

A slender, fair-faced young man with a delicate smile, Revlin Shand Apeto, stood beside his companion, a young man with intelligent eyes and golden-red hair, Pruelle Van Tain. These two, after staying with the Cavalry as temporary members following a series of events, were among the first to submit their official applications and pass the tests in the second recruitment. Though the recruitment process wasn't over, they were effectively official members now.

"We've heard the story. There are many leisure spots in the outskirts of Fourth Wall District frequented by nobles. Deputy Commander Ever suggested that we would be suitable for naturally blending in and identifying any suspicious individuals, so we immediately agreed."

Pruelle said with a smile, explaining their involvement.

"So… Are the five of us going?"

"No. We'll also take Nipollen, since we need to find the Awakener. Technically, I'm just going as Nipollen's guardian."

Pruelle joked, displaying a humility unexpected from the first son of the Tain family, known for his exceptional transformation ability.

"But will it be okay with so many of us? If there are too many people…"

Kanna, concerned for Nipollen, who spends most of his days as a cat due to his fear of people, questioned. Pruelle cheerfully reassured her.

"Oh, certainly. The lake and the forest walk are lush, so it shouldn't be too uncomfortable for Nipollen. And Priscilla… Hmm. With a bit of support from my sister, I plan to officially visit the private space of the Tain family, which is nearby. That's why I judged it to be fine."

Pruelle, after renouncing his rights as the heir to the family, had officially cut off ties to some extent and joined the Cavalry. However, he still kept in close contact with his siblings. A down-to-earth young man, who introduced himself to everyone simply as Elle, without any attachment to his lineage or surname, had decided to rely on his sister's help after a long time, a choice made to ensure the utmost safety of his youngest sibling, Nipollen.

"Ah… I see. I was worried over nothing."

"Not at all. You don't know how much both Nipollen and I are truly grateful for your constant concern, Deputy Commander Kanna. And to you as well, Deputy Commander Ever."

"Me?"

"Nippy really loved the cushion you made last time."

"Ah…"

Even in a serious situation, the mood suddenly became very warm. Pruelle, having expressed his gratitude to Ever, made a pleasantly happy face and gestured to Gakane.

"Shall we go then?"

—

Yuder soon found the mansion Kishiar had mentioned. It was nothing less than the embodiment of a traditional noble family's mansion, appearing quite ordinary.

The people passing by seemed utterly peaceful, making him wonder how he would ever locate Nathan Zuckerman amidst them. However, Yuder successfully found his counterpart without much difficulty.

It was because Nathan Zuckerman had stealthily approached him from behind in the blink of an eye.

“You’ve arrived.”

Nathan Zuckerman, in his inconspicuous attire, gestured to Yuder.

“Follow me,” he beckoned, leading the way to a tree near the back door of the mansion.

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Chapter 709

“You’ve arrived.”

Nathan Zuckerman, in his inconspicuous attire, gestured to Yuder.

“Please, follow me.”

“Follow me,” he beckoned, leading the way to a tree near the back door of the mansion. In a moment, exploiting a gap when no pedestrians were around, Nathan swiftly climbed the tree and leaped onto the roof of the adjacent building. It was a movement too quick to catch with the naked eye.

Yuder easily followed suit, using the power of the wind to mimic Nathan’s movements. Upon reaching the rooftop, the reason for Nathan’s choice of location became immediately clear to Yuder.

‘A blind spot between the chimneys,’ he realized, spotting a cleverly hidden area invisible from the ground below, perfect for concealment and offering a clear view of most of Baron Conche’s estate.

‘How did he find such a spot so quickly?’ Yuder pondered. Merely having a keen eye seemed insufficient for discovering such a place; it required experience in stealth and surveillance. Yuder had his past life’s experiences, but Nathan, an adjutant and knight of Kishiar, seemed unusually skilled in such clandestine activities, intriguing Yuder with his hidden talents.

“Why are you looking at me like that?” Nathan asked, noticing Yuder’s gaze.

“It’s just… I’m impressed by how quickly you found this place,” Yuder responded.

“It’s nothing special. Working under a lord who enjoys exploring and observing his surroundings every night, you naturally develop these skills,” Nathan replied nonchalantly, signaling Yuder to hide.

Without a word, Yuder laid down beside him, both men keeping their voices low as they focused their attention on Baron Conche’s residence.

“Did you notice anything unusual while observing earlier?” Yuder inquired.

“A few things,” Nathan began. “Earlier, a maid with her face covered came out and burned something in the corner of that garden. The trash she burned looked too large and heavy for one person. It seemed too rushed, even for a place short on staff. From this distance, it’s hard to tell what was burned.”

Yuder observed the charred remains piled up in the garden corner, noting the absence of anyone checking on the hastily burned debris.

“Also, over there seems to be the stables, which have been quite noisy inside. It’s quieter now though…”

Yuder’s gaze then shifted to a small stable near the burned trash. Although the roof obscured a full view, the hole-in-the-wall windows and large entrance revealed a few horses inside.

“We should investigate both,” Yuder decided, subtly exerting his powers of wind and earth, focusing intently. The pile of trash in the garden suddenly spilled open, scattering its contents. Amongst the indistinguishable charred remnants, a partially burned object caught Yuder’s sharp eyes.

‘Is that… a horse saddle?’ he thought, recognizing the basic structure despite its scorched and partially destroyed state. It was undoubtedly a luxury saddle, designed for a large horse, crafted from dyed top-quality leather with protective enchantments. ‘Too intact to be discarded,’ Yuder mused, sensing the gravity of their discovery.

It was clear at a glance that the saddle was of great value. Such expensive saddles were usually fitted for horses of noble bloodlines, and only the wealthiest of nobles could afford to ride such steeds.

Yuder surmised that the saddle had survived the fire due to the faint power of a protective enchantment embedded within it. It was rare for an item still imbued with magic energy to be discarded in such a manner. Only those with little regard for money would do such a thing.

‘The current Baron Conche, however, would never treat such an expensive saddle so carelessly,’ Yuder thought. He recalled Kishiar mentioning the Baron’s penchant for squandering his wealth on pleasures.

Yuder’s gaze shifted from the saddle to the stables in the distance. Although not visible to them, the horses there must have experienced a sudden chill and the ground shaking beneath them.

“—-!!”

Moments later, a commotion arose from within the stables, a sound only perceptible to the two men, gifted with heightened senses and the power of the wind.

“What did you do?” Nathan asked.

“I examined the contents of the trash and gave the horses a slight disturbance. That should bring someone out to calm them down soon enough.”

No sooner had Yuder finished speaking than a figure dashed out of the mansion. Even from this distance, the youth's Southern descent was evident. Shortly after he entered the stables, the horses quieted down.

'A Southerner, calming several agitated horses so effortlessly. There's much to ponder here.'

Following the youth, several other figures emerged from the mansion, their faces and skin covered with cloth.

'That attire…!' Yuder recognized it from his previous encounter in Tainu. It was similar to what the Southern merchants wore when they stayed at inns.

After a while, those at the stables emerged. They searched the surroundings, suspecting something amiss, scrutinizing walls and bushes. But they were unable to detect Yuder, who had skillfully used his powers from a distance that would be unimaginable for an ordinary Awakener.

Finding nothing, they returned to the mansion, and it fell silent once more.

"…"

Deciding there was nothing more to see, Yuder swiftly rose to his feet, and Nathan Zuckerman followed suit without a word.

"You've seen everything, I presume?"

"Yes," Nathan replied, his response heavy with unspoken implications.

"There are Southerners in the Baron Conche's estate. The ones with covered faces are surely those we've been pursuing from the West, and the first one who emerged is likely a servant of the

deceased Second Prince. If we retrieve and examine the partially burned saddle, we'll have more certainty."

"If retrieving the saddle is sufficient, I can go alone," Nathan offered. However, Yuder shook his head.

"No. Let's use this opportunity to capture them."

It was a bold statement that would have surprised his fellow Cavalry members, familiar with Yuder's temperament. But the loyal Southern knight showed no surprise. He studied Yuder's face, as if contemplating, then spoke.

"If we intrude, it could lead to complications. Perhaps we should retreat after retrieving the saddle and report back before taking further action."

"Hmm. I'd rather not lose a trail we've finally caught," Yuder disagreed.

Certainly, Nathan Zuckerman could proceed as he suggested. However, if those scoundrels caught wind and fled again in the meantime, it would only delay the Cavalry's return to normal operations. Yuder had no desire to take such a roundabout route when he was confident of success on a more direct path.

"Do you think just the two of us can manage it? I am aware of Sir Aile's exceptional skills, but…"

"You are being remarkably humble. It is certainly possible with just us two. You need not belittle yourself or worry about me."

…

Nathan Zuckerman fell silent, as if Yuder's words had struck a chord.

“The issue of unauthorized entry arises only if we fail to achieve any results. And in my opinion, there is no chance of that happening. If that saddle truly belongs to the Second Prince, the likelihood that his horse is still alive in the stables is quite high. Securing just these two things and capturing a few of the fellows we saw earlier will make our task much easier.”

…

Yuder lifted the corners of his lips slightly, looking at the silent Nathan Zuckerman.

“Of course, I understand your concerns. If you are not confident, I can handle it alone. Just watch over the area to prevent any disruptions or escapes. Should any problems arise, I will take full responsibility.”

“That won’t be necessary.”

Finally, Nathan Zuckerman withdrew his gaze from Yuder and nodded.

“I will accompany you.”

“Then let’s head down right away.”

They leaped down from the rooftop and headed naturally towards Baron Conche’s estate.

“This is certainly the first time I’ve teamed up with Sir Aile for such a task… It makes me wonder how much you actually know about me,” Nathan Zuckerman murmured as they scaled a wall. Yuder remained silent.

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Episode 710

The garden of Baron Conche's mansion, which they had entered surreptitiously, was as quiet as it had appeared from above.

At first glance, it looked like a fairly decent noble's mansion, but upon entering, it was unmistakably eerie. The flowers and trees had been long neglected, overgrown with weeds, and not a single window was open. The curtains were tightly drawn, making it impossible to peer inside.

For Yuder and Nathan Zuckerman, this was a welcome circumstance.

'It's likely the southerners did this to hide, but it makes our inspection easier.'

Yuder approached a pile of rubbish in a corner of the garden, which he had observed from above, and found a burnt saddle.

"If this belongs to the Second Prince, there should be a coat of arms or a mark indicating its owner somewhere."

"I'll inspect it."

Nathan Zuckerman immediately began examining the partially destroyed saddle. After brushing off the ash and turning it inside out, he finally found what they were looking for.

"Here it is. Four waves and a spear. The coat of arms of House Herne."

On the less damaged inner side, there was the coat of arms of House Herne four undulating waves and a winged spear in the center. Yuder, examining it, was confident his suspicion was correct.

Even if the Baron Conche family was related to the Ducal House of Herne, they could not use its coat of arms. This was more conclusive evidence than anything else.

‘They must have planned to burn it immediately.’

Nathan Zuckerman lifted the large saddle effortlessly with one hand, slung it over his back, and secured it with a strap he had produced from somewhere. This was an excellent method, preventing the hands from being obstructed and reducing the risk of losing the item.

Having secured the saddle so it wouldn’t fall, Nathan pointed to the pile of burnt rubbish.

“Should we not inspect the rest? There might be more items related to the Second Prince.”

“If you think it will take time… but if you’re confident, go ahead.”

“Understood.”

The knight immediately began sifting through the blackened lumps.

“Then I’ll head to the stables.”

“If there’s any trouble, signal me right away.”

Without looking back, Nathan quickly responded, and Yuder watched his retreating figure for a moment before moving on.

‘Working with someone without needing to give further instructions feels oddly refreshing.’

It had been the same when he went to the fighting arena with Kishiar, but this time the feeling was slightly different. Yuder walked

towards the stables, experiencing an unfamiliar yet pleasant sensation.

After confirming there was no one inside the stable, he cautiously entered. The white horse at the far end seemed a bit excited, stamping its hooves.

He had thought of sedating it if it caused any trouble, but thankfully, it wasn't that agitated. Yuder noted that there were a total of five horses in the stable and slowly walked deeper inside.

'Are these creatures asleep?'

Most of the horses had their eyes closed. Approaching the closest brown horse and tapping its sensitive ears and eyes elicited no reaction, which felt different from them being asleep.

Observing their abnormal state, Yuder recalled the southerner who had first entered. Despite the short time since his entry, the horses had quickly quieted down. The feed troughs were empty, indicating they hadn't been fed anything.

Then, there was only one conclusion to draw.

'The old servant of the Second Prince mentioned that the missing servant was particularly adept with horses. If that person I saw earlier is the same one, and if hes related to or an associate of the southern merchants we are pursuing… it's very likely that he is also an Awakener.'

In Yuder's previous life, in the Cavalry, there were quite a few Awakeners who excelled at handling animals. There were differences in the types of animals they could handle and the effects, but calming a distressed animal was relatively easy for them.

Yuder turned his head towards the horse at the very back, the only one with open eyes. Among the five horses, the white one in the

furthest position rolled its hooves a few times in its spot, looking at Yuder with suspicious and uneasy eyes.

‘Its breathing and all, it’s quite agitated.’

The creature was a head taller than the other horses and had a glossy sheen to its fur as if it had just been groomed, quite different from the other horses whose fur appeared dry and brittle. It seemed like the perfect horse to fit the expensive saddle found outside.

Judging by its muscular legs and the condition of its mane, it was clearly a noble steed at first glance.

Yuder approached slowly, careful not to startle it, and examined its legs. The horse’s leg fur showed signs of having been wet and then dried, particularly noticeable due to its white color.

‘…But that’s not all…’

Yuder’s gaze then swept over the pile of hay on the floor. Among the several hoofprints left by the horse’s excited pacing and rolling, there were faint red traces.

“…”

Yuder stared intently at the red marks and then slowly shifted his gaze to the horse’s hooves.

‘The blood started from its right hind hoof.’

It was definitely blood, but it didn’t come from the horse.

Rather, the horse had stepped in the blood, leaving a stained imprint.

Yuder was certain this horse was the owner of the saddle burnt outside.

‘So the horse was alive, too. We found it because they hadn’t killed it yet.’

“Let’s go.”

Yuder opened the fence and grabbed the horse’s bridle. However, the horse refused to follow even when he pulled on the bridle, shaking its head and stamping.

‘Clearly, the servant had used a calming ability on this one, but its resistance and fear, being the only one awake, suggested a state of extreme agitation and possibly a weaker influence from the servant.’

From the horse’s perspective, its owner had died, and it had been abruptly brought to a strange place, so its wariness was understandable. Even with a calming ability, it wasn’t easy to soothe such agitation.

What to do? The horse was too large to be sedated and taken away.

As Yuder pondered, Nathan Zuckerman appeared behind him.

“Why haven’t you come out yet?”

“Did you find anything useful in the pile of rubbish?”

“I found a somewhat intact handkerchief and a piece of cloth stained with blood. They don’t seem to belong to the Second Prince, but they might be useful if they belong to the murderer.”

“Good. I believe I’ve found the Second Prince’s horse.”

“This one?”

“Yes. But it’s too scared and resistant to leave.”

Yuder briefly explained his theory. Nathan Zuckerman's eyebrows slightly furrowed upon hearing that the missing servant of the Second Prince, who had disappeared, might have been an Awakener capable of handling horses.

"I've always thought since seeing the Cavalry members, there really are all sorts of abilities."

"Do you know how to calm or handle a horse in this state?"

"Can't the power of Sir Aile do it?"

"My abilities are primarily specialized in killing. I thought it better to seek the opinion of Sir Zuckerman, who has more experience with horses, than to knock it out from behind and carry it away."

Nathan Zuckerman looked at Yuder with an indiscernible gaze for a moment before letting out a short sigh.

"That won't work. Please step outside for a moment."

As Yuder stepped aside, Nathan Zuckerman approached the horse. He gently stroked the horse's head and various spots, emitting a few short whistles near its ear. Surprisingly, the horse began to calm down gradually.

After petting the horse until it became somewhat accustomed to his touch, Nathan turned his back. The horse noticed the burnt saddle tied behind him. Extending its neck, it sniffed the charred saddle several times, then shook its body and stamped its hooves.

"Aren't you exciting the horse even more?"

"Horses are much smarter than you think. They recognize and remember their owners and the gear they use. This horse's excitement is probably because it recognized its saddle and recalled what happened to its owner."

Nathan faced the horse again.

“I’m trying to take you home. You’re going with the saddle, so it’s okay to relax.”

Saying this, the knight slowly pulled the bridle. Like when Yuder had pulled it earlier, the horse stood still as if resisting, but then, as if it were a lie, it started walking and slowly moved outside the fence.

It was an unbelievably easy resolution.

“That’s impressive.”

Yuder sincerely praised him. Nathan seemed a bit embarrassed.

“…What will you do now?”

“Keep a firm hold on the bridle and don’t let go. I’m going to wake up the other horses.”

“Excuse me?”

Yuder immediately used his ability. The ground rumbled, and the previously quiet horses, as if asleep, all lifted their heads in unison.

“Hee-hee-hing!”

Simultaneously, the main building became noisy.

Hearing the footsteps of people running towards them, Yuder turned to Nathan.

“They’ll assume the horses woke up like before and will come carelessly. A battle will ensue, so please stay back to ensure the horse doesn’t get injured.”

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Chapter 711

Hearing the footsteps of people running towards them, Yuder turned to Nathan.

“They’ll assume the horses woke up like before and will come carelessly. A battle will ensue, so please stay back to ensure the horse doesn’t get injured.”

With a bang, the stable door swung open. The first to appear was a southern man, the same one Yuder had spotted from atop the building earlier.

Though Yuder couldn’t understand his words, the man’s mumbling in his native southern tongue was clearly cursing, indicating his displeasure with the situation.

The moment he reached out towards the rampaging horses, without properly surveying the surrounding, a gentle breeze suddenly blew over his head, tickling his forehead.

It’s impossible for wind to blow indoors. Odd, he thought, scratching his forehead and reflexively looking up.

Just then, seizing the moment, Yuder, who had been sitting unnoticed on the barn’s ceiling beam, leaped down upon him.

“What…!”

Thud. The man collapsed, struck by Yuder’s foot, unable to utter a sound. While not enough to knock him out, the attack was sufficient to daze him, followed swiftly by Yuder’s precise restraint and binding. After, Yuder stood up, his face unblemished by sweat.

“One down.”

“Ugh… ah…”

The southern man writhed in disbelief, now swiftly tied up. Nathan Zuckerman, holding the reins of a white horse and hiding behind a pillar, peeked out calmly.

“Do you think more will come soon?”

“No. It will take time for the second one to arrive.”

Just as I thought, Yuder mused silently, coldly gazing down at the man he had subdued.

Their presence here was all thanks to Yuder’s memory of the name ‘Conche Barony’, where one of its members was destined to become the new Herne Duke in the future. In other words, without the stroke of luck of living in the future and returning, it would have been impossible for them to guess these men’s presence here.

Right. In ordinary circumstances, this would be impossible. In a situation like this, even the most cautious ones wouldn’t come out more than once for something as trivial as noisy horses in the stable, would they?

The southern merchants hiding under the Conche Barony and the supposedly deceased Second Prince’s servant were better off unseen. Especially since a similar incident had happened and had already been deemed insignificant, there was no need for them to react sensitively.

And Yuder, piercing through these thoughts, easily subdued his opponent, gaining time for interrogation. Although it wouldn’t have been too disappointing if others had rushed in, this was certainly a more favorable turn of events.

The subdued young southern man breathed heavily through his nose, watching them. Upon closer inspection, he was definitely not

the man they had seen in the west. Initially panicking, he quickly quieted down, indicating he was no ordinary individual.

He doesn't seem particularly skilled, but he's definitely well-trained. The way his hands hold a sword makes that clear.

Those raised delicately in a duke's house, like young lords or servants, might mistake his calloused hands and body as a result of menial labor. But the eyes of the two men present could not be deceived.

Yuder knelt on one knee beside the man, bringing his face close. When faced with his dark eyes, so deep in color that their focus was hard to discern, most humans instinctively felt terror or a deep sense of dread. The man from the southern lands, though outwardly unresponsive, was no exception.

"You were the one who accompanied the Second Prince of the Herne family last night," Yuder stated.

The man remained silent.

Without concern for his silence, Yuder pressed on, "Did you kill the Second Prince?"

Silence again.

Yuder had expected as much. The lack of response was an answer in itself.

But would it be the same for the next question? Yuder deliberately paused before asking slowly and clearly, "Was your aim to assist in elevating the Conche family to the position of the next Duke of Herne?"

The man, who had shown no reaction to the previous questions, trembled ever so slightly at this. It was the reaction of someone

hearing the unbelievable.

‘Of course. It’s an unexpected question in this situation.’

Anyone would be startled if their carefully concealed identity and purpose were so abruptly probed.

But Yuder knew all this because he had seen the outcomes that would occur in the future when no one was aware of the conspiracy. This insight, combined with the little information Yuder had provided, allowed Kishiar La Orr to deduce the truth, a feat no one else could achieve.

Kishiar had said earlier, “If we can confirm their schemes this time, we gain additional information the certainty that they played the same hand in the previous game.”

He was sent here with Nathan Zuckerman to confirm just that. And now, Yuder was certain of it.

Of course, he had no intention of kindly informing his current opponent of this.

Yuder saw the man’s eyes, which had been wavering in confusion, suddenly close as if he had made a decision. Such behavior usually indicated an intent to self-destruct or commit suicide.

Without hesitation, Yuder used his power. A gust of wind sealed the man’s remaining breath as his hand struck a vital spot mercilessly.

The man fainted instantly.

After he fainted, Yuder meticulously tied him up again and pushed him with his foot. Nathan Zuckerman asked with a serious face, “Was that statement just now from the Duke?”

Nathan had come here before Yuder and Kishiar speculated about the southern merchants based on future information. Therefore, it was the first time he heard this part.

“Yes.”

“The Tain, followed by the Herne… There’s a clear intent,” Nathan remarked.

“They infiltrated from the inside, cunningly expanding their influence, draining wealth, and intending to distribute illegal drugs. There’s a definite consistency,” Yuder replied.

“I had wondered why the Duke suddenly ordered an investigation into the families related to the Herne family’s succession rights yesterday,” Nathan mused.

Nathan had been involved in that investigation.

Lost in thought with a grave look, Nathan suddenly peered outside and spoke, “I hear the southern language outside. They are angry about something unresolved and are looking for the man who fainted. Prepare yourself.”

“I understand. Do you have any idea how many there are?”

Though Yuder’s senses were sharper than most and he could amplify sounds with the power of the wind, he was no match for the quickness of a swordmaster. It was only sensible to utilize any useful abilities at hand.

Nathan Zuckerman closed his eyes with ease, focusing on the vibrations of the earth.

“There are two. At least one of them is definitely carrying a sword. I can hear the scabbard moving.”

“Understood.”

“Shall I help?”

“No need. Just keep a watch on the horses.”

Yuder climbed back onto the beam. As soon as he stifled his breath and stilled his presence, two men speaking in the southern language opened the door and entered.

Startled at the sight of their fallen comrade, they exclaimed, “Temash!” “Jaswi Kel!”

Though Yuder didn’t understand the southern language, he could tell that the first was a name and the second, a call to alert. And, just as Nathan had said, one of the men was indeed carrying a sword.

‘This accuracy is almost enviable, akin to see-through vision.’

Before they could look up, Yuder leaped down, using the power of the wind to slam the door shut.

The two men turned in surprise, and Yuder charged at them, drawing his sword.

The startled Southerner barely managed to draw his sword and block Yuder’s attack.

However, in combat, the one who strikes first usually has a decisive advantage, especially when one is prepared for how the opponents might attack.

Yuder pushed his opponent towards a spot in the stable where the ground was uneven due to horse hoof prints, causing the man to stumble and fall backward as he stepped on the uneven terrain.

Immediately, Yuder mercilessly struck at his vital points, then turned to the remaining man. The latter, perhaps an Awakener, was

hastily spewing water from his hands, but such a small amount of water was merely amusing to Yuder.

Soon, he too lay beside his comrade, sharing the same fate.

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Chapter 712

“You’ve managed this far quite easily,” observed Nathan Zuckerman.

“Typically, in such situations, the ones who arrive first are the weakest and least experienced in the group. Their complacency made it even easier,” replied Yuder, tying up the three men he had just subdued.

Yuder mused that these men, who had long masqueraded as a trading company, were unlikely to be overly strong or brutish. Instead, they would likely be more unassuming and intelligent, posing less of a threat and blending in more easily.

It was evident that they had been training for a long time, but individually, they were not particularly impressive. To lose to such men in a surprise attack would disgrace his storied battle history.

“Will we handle everything here?” asked Nathan.

“Certainly not,” Yuder responded, as if he already knew what Nathan was thinking.

“From what I saw earlier, six men entered the stable. We’ve captured three, so the rest are likely higher-ups. Among them, we might even encounter the same man we fought in Tainu.”

Nathan remained silent at the mention of their encounter in Tainu.

He must have thought of that man the moment he saw them previously, recalling how he was the first and longest to fight that man in the secret warehouse. His suggestion to retrieve the saddle first before returning indicated he had this in mind.

“Confronting him here would not be advantageous for us. There might be another noteworthy individual among the remaining men, so changing the location would be wiser.”

“And who might that be?”

“Don’t you remember? When that man realized we had infiltrated our warehouse and returned, he mentioned sensing a movement of power.”

“Ah…”

That time, Kishiar, Yuder, and Nathan had entered the warehouse through a hidden passage, not the main entrance. Yet, the men had detected them almost like ghosts.

Yuder was certain one of them was an Awakener who possessed the ability to sense ‘power.’

‘They probably detect changes or flows of power within a specific area or range. The reason they didnt constantly monitor the illegal drugs was probably because of this ability.’

The extent of their sensing capabilities was unknown. Nathan seemed to share this thought, saying, “If such a person existed, they would have appeared by now if they were here.”

“Indeed. However, such Awakeners can sometimes use their abilities from a distance. We never saw the face of the Awakener then. Keep that in mind.”

“…True. If they sensed the change from afar and informed an ally who could be or go to the location, their response might be slightly delayed.”

“Yes. So, staying here any longer serves no purpose. It might give our opponents more time to gather information on us.”

The number of their enemies seemed larger than anticipated, and both of the key individuals might not even be here. However, Yuder, having confirmed the presence of those distributing Calanesa powder in the south at Nukijo's fighting arena, believed that at least the one who took the powder then would certainly be among them.

"In terms of swordsmanship, he was quite exceptional," remarked Yuder, reflecting on their encounter.

Even when facing the sword of Nathan Zuckerman, a Swordmaster, the man had not been significantly outclassed. He possessed the ability to freely concentrate and project his power. At the time, Yuder was unable to fully exert his strength, and Kishiar, to avoid revealing his identity, had engaged the man using only the power of an Awakener and his physical skills. Nonetheless, his prowess was undeniably impressive.

'But now, the power I can wield has changed, so it doesn't matter. If I can expose his identity, even if he escapes, today's mission will be deemed a success.'

While Yuder was lost in thought, Nathan Zuckerman sighed, furrowing his brow.

"I always feel it, but facing an Awakener really requires preparedness for every possibility."

"Well… you're not entirely wrong there."

"The way sir Aile identifies, handles, and responds to such individuals sometimes seems mysterious to me, though…"

Suddenly, the knight who had been observing Yuder intently turned away, having briefly interrupted their conversation.

"If you keep watching, perhaps you'll eventually find the answer."

But, would that day ever come?

Nonetheless, he found it somewhat commendable that Nathan hadn't completely abandoned his vigilance towards him.

'To earn such admiration from Nathan Zuckerman… unimaginable in my previous life.'

'Perhaps it's the time we've spent together that's changed things…'

Yuder watched the profile of the Southern knight with a complex mix of feelings.

Kishiar had once said that Nathan and Yuder had quite similar personalities and could become good friends. If Kishiar had heard their current conversation, he might have felt somewhat bitter, but Yuder was content with the level of their relationship as it was.

With a sense of willingness, Yuder suggested to Nathan, "If you wish to better understand how to face Awakeners, encountering as many of them as possible is the best way. Would you consider joining the Cavalry training when we return to the capital?"

"Me?" Nathan asked.

"Even if you're not an Awakener, a knight of your caliber should have no trouble."

"…"

"Merely sparring should be fine, right? Besides… if you join the training, you could spar with me."

It was the last part that elicited a response from Nathan. His face lit up with interest as he silently loaded the three Southern men onto

the horse. The white horse seemed unbothered even with three men on its back.

“I’ll consider it.”

“Good. Let me know once you’ve decided.”

Yuder was looking forward to sparring with Nathan, who had gained experience fighting various Awakeners.

“But is it alright to load three men on a horse at once?”

“This breed is strong enough to carry another one if needed.”

Nathan stroked the horse’s nose, calming its previously annoyed snorts.

As they were about to leave the stable, suddenly, a concentrated ball of energy flew towards them.

‘…Was there no sign before?’

Yuder instinctively dodged it, and Nathan did the same. The energy hit the stable door, causing a loud explosion, and the horse screamed in fright.

“You finally show yourself.”

Three figures, faces hidden by thick clothing, stood not far away. Yuder realized they had been waiting for them to emerge.

And Yuder realized that the power just unleashed by their assailant felt eerily familiar.

‘That man. He was indeed here. I had a feeling this could happen, so I tried to leave quickly… but it ended up like this.’

Though he had exchanged a few words with Nathan Zuckerman while preparing to leave, it hadn't taken long. In that short time, their enemy had meticulously killed their presence and waited outside, ready to attack. The fact that they evaded detection even by a swordmaster like Nathan suggested that the other two were also Awakeners of no small skill.

'Let's see. The one in the middle, he's the one who sent the energy. The one I saw in the west…'

The Southerner, under scrutiny from Yuder, returned a piercing gaze, sharp enough to be felt even through his almost completely concealed face. A tense chill ran down Yuder's spine.

"I thought the way you infiltrate so effortlessly seemed familiar, and indeed, it's an old acquaintance."

"…"

"You won't surrender and release them, even if I ask nicely, will you?"

"That sounds more like my line."

Yuder responded nonchalantly, to which the Southerner let out a quiet, warmthless laugh.

"Yes. I thought you'd say that."

The moment he raised his hand, the battle began.

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Chapter 713

“Sir Zuckerman, please take the horses and retreat.”

Yuder skillfully deflected the oncoming condensed energy with his sword, then summoned the power of the wind to create a small whirlwind. Dust flew everywhere, obscuring the enemy’s vision. Nathan Zuckerman shook his head in response to Yuder’s hurried command.

“I cannot do that.”

“Then who will protect the horses?”

Scanning the surroundings quickly, Nathan Zuckerman released the reins and energetically patted the white horse’s hindquarters while blowing a high, short whistle. Amazingly, the horse, as if responding to a command, hurriedly turned and galloped towards the back of the stable, away from the front where the battle raged. Yuder felt a momentary confusion, unsure if it was right to let the horse go like that.

“What have you done?”

“There’s no time to explain. It’s better to let it escape on its own than worry about who will protect it.”

‘…He has a point.’

Realizing Nathan Zuckerman was determined to join the fight, Yuder refrained from further argument and withdrew his power. Through the settling dust, the southern swordsman sharply called out.

“Bahram!”

A subordinate to his right, unnoticed despite continuous observation, suddenly stepped away from the group and stomped the ground. As he moved, a translucent aura surrounded him, partially obscuring his form.

Wrapped in that aura, his footsteps became silent. Even the light overhead and the natural sounds of movement hushed, and his speed increased dramatically, like a nearly invisible phantom.

Nathan immediately chased after him.

‘He must be the Awakener who can conceal his presence.’

Indeed, with such a skill, from the stable, he and Nathan werent even able to notice the three adversaries.

‘But its weakness is too obvious.’

The power only worked when unseen by the enemy.

A regular person might find such stealth threatening, perfect for slipping away unnoticed.

However, Yuder and Nathan Zuckerman had previously encountered the ultimate stealth abilities in an arena.

‘Compared to Cyregina’s complete invisibility, this is just child’s play.’

Nathan Zuckerman, with his formidable observational skills, had even captured Cyregina. How could he miss someone still visible? Yuder, confident in Nathan’s pursuit, completely lost interest in that direction.

“Aren’t you going to follow your comrade?”

The southern swordsman, noting Yuder’s swift disinterest, inquired. Yuder replied impassively.

“Why should I?”

His faith and certainty that Nathan would handle it allowed such a response. However, his stark expression perhaps led the enemy to misunderstand.

“Are you saying it doesn’t matter if he dies? You facing the two of us alone is sheer arrogance.”

Yuder remained silent. While the latter assumption was correct, the former was not. He had no intention of abandoning a talent like Nathan Zuckerman to death, but saw no need to explain. The unknowing southern swordsman smirked coldly, sword in hand.

“At that time, I was unsure where you intruders had come from, leading to several misunderstandings. It wasn’t until after escaping Tainu that I understood your true nature. How you discovered our location is beyond me, but it doesn’t matter.”

As he spoke, he lifted his sword and charged at Yuder.

“You won’t be leaving here alive.”

Yuder raised his sword to block the attack. The clash of the two swords produced a loud, sharp sound, and Yuder felt a sensation as if his grip might tear apart. Just this single exchange was enough to give him a thrilling sense of his opponent’s skill.

‘Indeed, he’s not just all talk. His strength is more impressive than it appears.’

His gloves, always worn for protection, proved helpful in this moment. Without the magic-infused gloves, his palms might have split open from that initial clash.

His adversary seemed to quickly realize that Yuder’s strength was slightly inferior. Observing the slight tremble in their locked

swords, the man spoke.

“You wield a weapon too grand for its master. Be thankful for your sturdy sword.”

“…”

“The one I fought before had a much better sword than yours… Didn’t he come? Or was it the one who just disappeared?”

“…”

“Seeing you use the wind earlier, you must be the one who used wind and… water before. Is that the extent of your abilities? Or…”

Unable to bear it, Yuder finally sighed.

“You really do talk too much.”

“What?”

Engaging in a pointless contest of strength here would be as good as offering his back to the other guy and asking him to kill him. However, if he could lure the enemy into acting prematurely, even a disadvantageous power struggle can be a useful decoy.

‘Now!’

Yuder let his clashing sword slide away and jumped back, scattering the power of the wind in all directions.

“Ugh!”

The southern swordsman, and the other attacker who was approaching from Yuder’s blind spot, staggered as they were mercilessly hit in the face by the wind carrying dirt and dust. Seizing the moment, Yuder extended his hand holding the sword upward, then forcefully brought it down. The enemy’s swords, momentarily

weakened in their grips, followed Yuder's movement, rising and then plunging downward.

"Ah…!"

They must have felt the illusion of their swords becoming momentarily lighter and then unbearably heavy, slipping from their grasp. The southern swordsman, despite losing balance, managed to cling to his sword hilt, but his ally, who had tried to ambush Yuder from behind, was not so fortunate. The sword slipped through his loosened grip and rolled on the ground with an undignified clatter.

In that moment of shock and disarmament.

That brief span was more than enough for Yuder to drive his sword into his opponent's body.

Yuder instantly leaped up, stepping on the wind, and threw a small dagger he had drawn from his cloak. It was a new dagger given to him by Sunz and Emon.

'Proving useful right from the start.'

"Kuhk…!"

The southern swordsman's ally, pierced in the shoulder by the dagger, fell with a stifled scream. The fact that he didn't cry out disgracefully showed that he, too, was well-trained, despite appearances.

"You…!"

Just as Yuder heard the southern swordsman's voice, laden with intensified emotion, he leaped back again, stepping on the wind. The forces hurled by the southern swordsman in pursuit, carrying a fearsome momentum, suddenly collided with each other in mid-air and exploded violently.

‘…He could do even this?’

Despite his relatively calm mind, Yuder’s body, caught in the blast radius, was flung to the ground as if hurled from above.

“Ugh…”

Reacting instinctively, Yuder wrapped his head protectively and rolled, using a falling technique. There was no significant impact, but he couldn’t fully shield himself from the continuing onslaught of attacks.

Boom, Crash! Bang!!

In the midst of the relentless onslaught, Yuder summoned a wall of earth and wind that swiftly enveloped and protected him.

Think only you can launch such frenzied attacks?

He had thought this before, but the southern swordsman used his power in a way not much different from the aura attacks utilized by knights. The mid-air collision and subsequent explosion were somewhat surprising, yet the long-range attacks, merely quick and straightforward attempts to target the enemy, lacked any element of novelty.

Even as he fell, Yuder didn’t lose grip of his sword. Planting it into the ground, he unleashed his strength.

-Rumble, rumble…

A much larger and more immense force surged through him, and crimson veins pulsed across the gloves and clothes covering his skin. A golden glow flickered brightly inside his left eye.

As the power of the earth intensified, the southern swordsman, sensing the abnormal movement, paused his attack momentarily.

Seizing this opportunity, Yuder got to his feet but was momentarily distracted by something that had fallen from his torn outer garment.

What captured his usually unwavering focus during battle were colorful pieces of wrapping paper and translucent, candy-like fragments, shimmering like colored glass.

'…Ah. This.'

It seemed his pocket had torn during the blast. The issue was that it contained candies Kishiar had given him before coming here.

'…I had only eaten one of them.'

For the first time, Yuder felt an unfamiliar emotion as he looked down at the shattered candy pieces. He didn't need to feel around to know; there was nothing left in his pocket now.

"…"

The rumbling from beneath gradually subsided.

Yuder turned his head to look directly at the southern swordsman. Both of them were in a sorry state, but the appearance of the southern swordsman was now completely different from the beginning.

His face, previously meticulously concealed, was now exposed due to the torn clothing, revealing deep copper-brown hair and bright denim-blue eyes. His physique was imposing, contrasting with a noble and delicate appearance that would surprise anyone. However, none of these details mattered to Yuder.

"Those eyes…"

The southern swordsman, noticing Yuder's differently colored eyes, spoke with a furrowed brow. At that moment, the golden light

flickering in Yuder’s left eye suddenly burst forth with an intensity incomparable to before.

Simultaneously, the vibrations of the earth, thought to have died down, exploded anew.

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Chapter 714

Yuder Aile’s power, reputed to be stronger than any other Awakener in the world, was in fact neither infinite nor perfect.

Using opposing elements like fire and water simultaneously would halve their strength. Moreover, employing more than two attributes at once led to excessive power consumption, significantly slowing mobility and decision-making.

Although capable of handling multiple attributes, using them all at once or indiscriminately would inevitably lead to limitations for a human. Overexertion often resulted in significant repercussions and aftereffects, much like other Awakeners.

Thus, Yuder typically focused on a single attribute or combined two that enhanced each other’s power for maximum efficiency. This approach was proven and established through extensive training and combat.

In situations requiring the decisive suppression of an enemy with a single attribute, none was as formidable as Earth.

Earth did not possess the inherent damaging power of fire upon contact, nor the delicate control of water beneficial in daily life. Nor was it like wind or metal, which enhanced mobility or created opportunities when integrated into different combat styles.

However, everything in the world ultimately rests upon the Earth, originating or connected to it. Even monsters not native to this land appear by treading upon it.

Hence, Earth had a broader range of use than any other attribute, and using it for attacks had a very low failure rate. The realization

that the seemingly perpetual solidity beneath one's feet was not a given often led to an instinctual fear for life.

-Krrr-krrr-krrr…!

Therefore, when Yuder's eyes burst into golden light and the ground began to tremble, the southern swordsman did not hesitate to swing his sword toward him. Though not as complete as that of a swordmaster, his aura's fragments, mixed with the power of an Awakener, surged toward Yuder with intensified force.

But the attack did not reach Yuder. As the mass of energy almost struck him, a sudden wall of earth rose, blocking it.

-Bang!!

The earth wall shattered, exploding. Despite expecting a significant impact, Yuder emerged from the dust unscathed. Seeing his pale, cold face, the southern swordsman furrowed his brow, then gripped his sword and leaped to the side.

His sword, moving at a speed difficult for ordinary eyes to follow, continued its attack. But earthen walls, as tall as a man and square in shape, emerged here and there, perfectly blocking every assault.

-Bang, bang, bang-bang-bang-bang!

No matter how unexpectedly the attacks came, what crumbled was not Yuder but the walls. The collapsing earth returned to its place unharmed, making it feel as if throwing fragile eggs against an opponent clad in an earthen armor.

"Resorting to tricks, I see. Then how about this…!"

After hurling a mass of energy, the southern swordsman leaped over the rising earth wall in a blink, aiming a downward strike at

Yuder, who was supposed to be behind it a feint targeting close-quarters combat.

The audacious attack, executed with incredible speed, left no time for preparation, but Yuder was not beneath the descending sword.

‘…What?’

Within the slowly unfolding vista, the southern swordsman saw Yuder standing farther away than he had anticipated.

‘When did he get there…?’

Their eyes met, and Yuder’s golden irises shone vividly. Yuder opened his mouth and murmured softly.

“Try rolling around yourself.”

Captivated by those eyes, which seemed not of a human but of another being, the southern swordsman silently landed below on the seemingly solid ground.

Or, he had attempted to.

“Uh?”

Just before his feet touched the ground, it suddenly gave way beneath him.

He nearly plummeted into a pit, swamp-like in its nature, before hastily catching onto a firmer section and leaping out. But as he moved, the earth continued to soften and collapse beneath him, making it impossible to find solid footing again.

“What is this…”

With no time even to speak, as the ground kept collapsing, he desperately used his abilities to leap, trying to land on still intact patches of earth. The entire garden of the Conche Barony seemed like a notorious desert quicksand. Large ornamental rocks and tall trees were engulfed and unsightly disappeared into the sinking earth. Every time he managed to land on a slightly firmer patch and launch an attack, another earthen wall would rise, block it, and burst into oblivion.

It felt unlike fighting on a small boat adrift in a vast sea, more like facing a vast, untamable force of nature.

‘How can a human wield such power?’

This was unthinkable. He had never heard of a human wielding power in this manner, let alone manipulating such a vast expanse of land as if it were his own limbs. It was a level of power impossible unless one was prepared to die right there.

‘Theres no way he can go on forever. If I just endure, he too will reach his limit.’

With this thought, the southern swordsman ceased his attempts to attack Yuder, focusing instead on dodging the crumbling ground and buying time. Sure enough, as soon as he started to hold on for a while to see if it was really effective, the speed at which the ground collapsed began to slow down little by little.

‘Just a bit longer…!’

But then it happened.

“Sir Aton!”

Startled by the sudden shout, he turned to see his comrade, who had been struck down by a dagger, now laying half-buried in the collapsing earth.

While he was attacking Yuder, his comrade had regained consciousness and retreated, but was swept up in the collapsing ground, unable to escape due to severe wounds.

Despite desperately enhancing his body's strength to escape, the relentless, dragging pull of the sinking earth rendered it futile. The terror in his face, as he was inexorably drawn down, betrayed his disbelief at dying in such a manner, despite being trained to do anything to achieve his objectives.

Grinding his teeth, the southern swordsman leaped high, using his power to land on the stable earth. His fingertips, transformed like the paws of a mighty beast, barely grasped the collar of his comrade, still precariously clinging on. But as his own footing began to shake and sink, his comrade, panic-stricken, cried out.

"You mustn't! Get away, get away! At this rate, Sir Aton will…"

"Quiet! Don't open your mouth!"

Opening one's mouth was an invitation for the earth's debris to enter a death sentence even before being rescued.

As the southern swordsman began to exert more strength, he suddenly heard footsteps from behind.

The sound of a hunter approaching to claim his prey, driven into a corner.

Turning his head, he saw Yuder approaching, his sword arm dangling. Yuder's torn clothes and dirt-covered body resembled theirs. Seeing Yuder's face, paler than before, the southern swordsman believed his guess was right.

As a human, Yuder too had naturally reached his limit.

Proving his conjecture, the collapsing earth dragging his comrade also began to subside gradually.

‘He’s exhausted too. There’s no doubt about his limit. Then…!’

The southern swordsman looked down at his comrade he was pulling. To increase his own chances of survival, the best course seemed to be to abandon his comrade and regrip his sword to attack Yuder.

Even though the sinking had slowed, the ground was already deeply hollowed. It was uncertain whether his half-buried comrade could survive.

The southern swordsman looked down. There was only one choice to make.

“I’m sorry.”

With gritted teeth, he released the grip on his comrade’s collar.

“Ahh…!”

He regripped his sword while hearing the screams of his comrade being swallowed back into the hollowed ground.

However, in that moment of decision, when he turned his head again, what he faced was a wave of earth rising like a high mountain, with Yuder standing atop it.

Yuder, gazing emotionlessly at the southern swordsman, stood with his feet on the ground that was eerily calm, as if all these events were of no concern to him. His pale face, unchanging even while moving an unimaginable, almost inhuman strength, resembled a grim reaper watching someone facing death.

In that instant, the southern swordsman realized.

‘He wasn’t using his full strength until now. And even now…!’

Yuder had deliberately set a trap, playing with him cruelly and flawlessly.

He had made him roll on the ground, just as he had done, but with an even more overwhelming force.

As this realization hit him, a wave of earth, like a tidal wave, engulfed the southern swordsman, burying him deep below.

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Chapter 715

“Huff…”

Yuder exhaled deeply, surveying the land on which he stood. Until moments ago, this had been a noble house’s garden, but now, it was barely recognizable as such.

Where once were valuable flowers and ornamental rocks, now lay a desolate, flattened wasteland. Only a few branches protruding from the brown earth weakly claimed its former glory.

The transformation seemed beyond human capabilities, yet Yuder’s expression was far from triumphant or joyful.

‘I didn’t intend to use so much power.’

Just as he realized all of Kishiar’s candies, of which he had eaten only one, were gone, his plan to subdue the opponent vanished from his mind. Even during his time as a Cavalry Commander, he rarely resorted to such ruthless measures. It was only after he had relentlessly crushed and buried his opponents that Yuder acknowledged his own deep frustration and anger.

Frustration and anger. He was surprised to find such juvenile emotions still lingering within him, yet the reality before his eyes was undeniable.

‘At least I kept my sanity to keep my power within the garden’s bounds.’

Even in the midst of overwhelming his foes, Yuder’s power had not extended beyond the garden. The peaceful and quiet world outside seemed oblivious to the chaos within.

Yuder, glancing down at his torn coat pocket with a dark gaze, found it empty. As he was about to succumb to a sinister glint in his left eye, the sound of approaching horse hooves caught his attention.

“Sir Aile.”

Nathan Zuckerman, holding the reins of a white horse, looked different from when he had chased after the enemy earlier. His attire was in disarray, though he seemed unharmed.

“The garden… What happened here? And the enemies…?”

“I used the power of the earth, and I won.”

“Just ‘used’?”

Nathan’s gaze swept over the devastated garden.

“Such power is far from ordinary. It’s clear you used more than a moderate amount.”

“I did use more than usual, but it wasn’t excessive.”

“What do you consider excessive?”

“It would be difficult to repeat what I’ve just done, but I still have enough strength to defeat a few more foes. That’s not excessive.”

“I see. That’s your standard.”

Yuder hadn’t exerted himself to the point of losing control over his powers. Though significantly drained, he could still defend himself and escape if more enemies appeared. This was his assessment, though Nathan seemed less convinced.

With a complex expression, Nathan surveyed the garden again.

“So, where are the fallen enemies now? They’re not in sight.”

Yuder quietly lowered his gaze to the ground, followed by Nathan. They looked at the flat land, indistinguishable from the rest, covered in brown dirt.

“They’re right there.”

“You mean they’re dead?”

“No, they’re not dead. I simply buried them.”

With a casual flick of his hand, Yuder caused the earth to tremble slightly and open up, revealing two figures buried within. Covered head to toe in dirt, they resembled corpses, but a closer look revealed they were indeed breathing, thanks to the small air holes Yuder had considerately left.

Despite his deep frustration over the shattered candies, Yuder couldn’t recklessly kill these significant figures, especially the one who appeared to be the leader of the Southerners.

‘I remember someone calling him Aton. If I recall correctly, that’s the man responsible for the downfall of the Tain ducal family.’

Yuder strained his memory. If he was not mistaken, he had heard that name twice before.

The first time was after the mission in the West, when the Duke of Tain stood trial. Yuder had heard from Pruelle, who had attended the trial, about a Southern merchant who had manipulated the Tain family.

That despicable man, whom I hesitate even to call ‘father’, told me about Aton. It seems he represented the Southern merchants, seizing all of the Tain family’s wealth and authority. Even the orders to send merchants to the West were issued through him.

The second time was in a report from Steiber and Devran, who had been undercover at a gambling house to monitor the Duke of Tain. Unlike Steiber, the unfortunate chef who rarely went outside, Devran, who served tables, had seen the Duke of Tain intimately interacting with an unidentified Southerner, showing a serious dependence on him.

Though the report didn't focus on the man's name, as the priority was on the pursuit, it did briefly mention the name Aton.

However, all that was known was his name; information about his appearance was difficult to obtain. The primary reason was that he always concealed his appearance thoroughly when with the Duke of Tain.

During the trial, it was mentioned that the Duke of Tain didn't care whether the Southerners concealed their appearances or not; in fact, he preferred them keeping their identities hidden. As a result, even in the courtroom, no one could properly describe Aton's appearance.

Even when the Duke of Tain, claiming to have been deceived by the Southern merchants, tried to shift the blame, he couldn't provide any details about Aton other than his name. It was a situation so absurd that it made one wonder if the Duke was deliberately protecting the Southerners' identities.

Had the Duke of Tain shown even a slight interest or taken care to recognize the Southerners, Yuder might have immediately recognized Aton among the Southerners he encountered in the West.

'Anyway, considering how well he manipulated the Duke of Tain for years, I assumed he was a cautious man and wouldn't come to the West himself, but… I was wrong.'

Yuder gazed down at the unconscious Aton.

‘Given the Duke’s description, I assumed he was someone who catered to his every whim, unlikely to be involved in physical confrontations…’

Even in unconsciousness, the fact that he had not released his grip on the sword, and the prowess he displayed in two battles, indicated that this man was more a warrior than a merchant. It was astonishing to think how he had managed to suppress his nature and cater to the Duke of Tain’s whims for so many years, considering the great confidence he seemed to have in his abilities.

“When Sir Aile mentioned earlier that unauthorized entry would be acceptable if the outcome was favorable, I thought it was quite reckless… But it seems it has come to pass as you said.”

Yuder broke off his thoughts and turned to Nathan Zuckerman, whose expression was complex yet not entirely negative.

“Didn’t I tell you I would manage it?”

“Still, I think it might be better to dissuade you next time.”

“Why is that?”

“Seeing the state of your clothes and skin despite my presence, I believe the Duke will be quite concerned.”

This unexpected remark held a power that momentarily stunned Yuder, more than anything else could. He glanced down at himself. His skin was somewhat dirtied from rolling around, though not to the extent of bleeding. But as for his clothes and the candies.. Indeed, he had no defense there.

“…That’s…”

Before Yuder could find a response, either fortunately or unfortunately, the Southern swordsman regained consciousness.

‘…In the end, it’s all because of him.’

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Chapter 716

“…That’s…”

Before Yuder could find a response, either fortunately or unfortunately, the Southern swordsman regained consciousness.

‘…In the end, it’s all because of this b*st*rd.’

Flames flickered in Yuder’s eyes. He approached Aton, the writhing Southern swordsman, and flipped him over with a kick to his back, swiftly disarming him. In an instant, he twisted the torn sleeve of the enemy’s garment to bind Aton’s hands and feet, displaying a skill that left onlookers in awe, albeit with an unpleasant roughness that made Aton groan softly.

“Ugh…”

As soon as the man opened his eyes and saw Yuder’s face, he instinctively reached for his sword. However, the sword was already in Yuder’s possession, leaving Aton with nothing but twitching fingers.

Only then did Aton realize he was bound, and clarity returned to his eyes. The first emotion to surface on his face was confusion.

“How am I not dead?”

“Because I buried you with an air hole.”

Aton muttered incredulously at Yuder’s response.

“That’s…”

“Possible.”

The living proof that it’s possible was none other than him.

Aton looked at Yuder, who interrupted him with an answer. His gaze fixed on Yuder’s eyes, which had lost their golden glow as he was not using his abilities.

“Are you… human?”

“If your eyes aren’t deceiving you, I suppose so.”

Yuder was accustomed to opponents who couldn’t defeat him, and thus resorting to accusations of cheating or being out of the ordinary. Even a daring Southerner, who had secretly shaken the Empire for years, seemed no different. Yuder gripped Aton’s collar coldly and taunted him.

“We don’t have time for a cozy debate about whether I’m human or not. The truth is, I won, and you lost. That’s all there is to it. Now let’s have a proper conversation, ‘Aton’.”

“Do you know who I am?”

It was a counter-question to gauge whether Yuder was just bluffing or actually knew something about him. Yuder, detecting the ulterior motives in the man’s demeanor, feigned ignorance in his reply.

“You thought we wouldn’t find out about you after you caused such a commotion? It seems you’ve been involved in not just the Tain Duke’s commotion, but also the Herne Second Prince’s incident.”

“A commotion…”

Aton murmured as if speaking about someone else’s troubles.

“The crimes of the Tain Duke can’t be seen as our fault. He chose his path, and we merely followed orders until it seemed we too might be in danger. The death of Herne’s Prince is the same. On what grounds do you claim all this as our sin? We are members of a merchant trading company, here for dealings with the Conche Baron’s family.”

It seemed he was strategizing to feign ignorance now that he was caught. Such words might work in a court of law, but not with Yuder.

“Is that so? Then the Second Prince’s horse and servant being here had nothing to do with you?”

Yuder gestured in a direction, and Aton, turning to look, saw a snorting white horse and four Southerners piled atop each other, particularly the one at the bottom. After a moment, he coldly replied.

“Yes. I have no knowledge of that. To my knowledge, that man is a servant of the Conche Baron’s family, unrelated to us.”

“Why was he here with the horse, then?”

“That’s a question for the Conche Baron, not me. If you’re curious, go catch them instead of us. Unless it’s related to the Tain Duke, I see no reason to answer. Stop wasting time and hand me over to the authorities.”

“Interesting.”

Yuder, with a face that showed no amusement, replied coldly.

“I never said what happened to the Second Prince of Herne. Yet, you seem well aware of news that hasn’t been announced publicly, insisting you know nothing.”

At those words, Aton’s expression faltered briefly.

Yuder leaned in closer, gripping Aton's collar tighter, their gazes nearly touching.

His voice, low and slow, eerily scraped the air.

"Do you really think we are completely unaware, and that it's mere luck that brought us here, with only a partial knowledge of your deeds?"

"…"

"You're caught, so it can't be helped. Despite the obvious, you play ignorant, hoping to quickly be handed over to the authorities. Then, you plan to shift the blame onto others and escape from our grasp. Once you're free, you think escaping will be easy."

"…"

"Ansuma Mehet. The Wolf's Eye Tribe."

At Yuder's words, Aton's brow furrowed in disbelief.

"You wouldn't claim to be ignorant of this name, would you?"

"…Where did you learn that name?"

The look in Aton's eyes changed dramatically, now tinged with a hint of murderous intent.

'Learn it from where?'

It was uncovered by one of the most notorious troublemakers in the Cavalry, Finn Eldore, and the diligent Gakane Bolunwald, who never missed even the smallest clue.

But naturally, Yuder had no intention of sharing that information. Instead, he faintly lifted one corner of his mouth.

“You can probably guess where I learned it.”

“…A traitor, perhaps?”

It was natural to first suspect the source for an impossible-to-obtain information was from a traitor. But that wasn’t the case.

Yuder gave him time to misunderstand, then finally spoke.

“Your dealings with the Tain Duke weren’t for mere wealth or minor privileges. You desired a prestigious name to hide behind and a network that spanned the entire empire, didn’t you? The item traded with the Conche Baron’s family wasn’t trivial either, but rather a significant gift to the next duke.”

“…”

“Try denying this too.”

Aton’s gaze sank deeper. His eyes swiftly scanned the unconscious Southerners around him.

He was starting to suspect his surroundings.

“There must be a few of the Conche Baron’s people hiding in that mansion. After confronting them, I’ll gladly send you to the authorities you so wish to see. Of course, then the Cavalry will have to return, given your Awakener status.”

Yuder expected a proper reaction from Aton at this point.

However, the silent man’s response was laughter.

“Ha… Haha.”

‘Has he lost his mind?’

“Truly impressive. Yes, now I see. You must be the hero of the Cavalry, Yuder Aile.”

“However You rarely use more than two attributes against us, so I wasn’t entirely certain. Had I been sure earlier, instead of just tearing your clothes, I would have killed you on the spot. What a missed opportunity.”

Who did he think he was, caught and still speaking of killing? Yuder couldn’t fathom his audacity, and the mention of his torn clothes reignited his suppressed anger.

‘This b*st*rd…’

Just as Yuder’s left eye began to glow golden with anger unconnected to the topic of conversation, a large hand suddenly intervened in front of his face.

“Please wait.”

“…What are you doing?”

Yuder halted his movements and inquired. His gaze, which would have normally instilled fear in his Cavalry comrades upon meeting their eyes, was met with an expressionless face by Nathan Zuckerman, who replied,

“Close contact with the enemy increases the likelihood of unforeseen situations, so I would advise against it.”

“Is this too close a contact?”

“Yes, it is. Especially in a situation where, for unknown reasons, your emotions seem excessively heightened compared to earlier. Since we are moving together, I suggest we eliminate any potential risks.”

“…”

“Im sure the Duke wouldve said something similar.”

Only then did Yuder understand Nathan Zuckerman’s sudden intervention.

Apparently, Nathan had noticed Yuder’s personal resentment towards Aton, which had grown significantly in his absence, and wanted to advise against engaging the enemy in such an enraged state. However, to explain the cause, Yuder would have to mention receiving candies from Kishiar. Preferring to accept Nathan Zuckerman’s concern rather than admit his anger was due to the broken candies, Yuder decided to heed the advice.

‘Yes. Pointless contact would only make me want to strike him more. After all, we are the victors, and he has already paid for his deeds.’

As Nathan had said, Yuder also thought that similar words wouldve been said by Kishiar.

Shortly after, his emotions rapidly subsided.

“…Understood.”

Yuder released Aton’s collar and stepped back.

“Then, Sir Zuckerman, please drag him to the mansion in my stead.”

“Of course.”

In the moment Nathan Zuckerman tried to grasp Aton’s shoulder, which had been turned over, Aton raised his head. A different expression flickered in his eyes than before.

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Chapter 717

In the moment Nathan Zuckerman tried to grasp Aton's shoulder, which had been turned over, Aton raised his head. A different expression flickered in his eyes than before.

"Zuckerman… Zuckerman, huh? That's not a common surname. If I recall correctly, it was the surname of 'Makunata,' a servant that was adopted by Duke Pelleta, the Commander of the Cavalry."

Nathan Zuckerman's hands, which had always remained calm, briefly paused. In their mutual gaze, Aton continued to speak.

"I heard about this Makunata rising from a servant to a knight, but I never heard he was skilled enough to take on the enemy alone after the hero of the Cavalry stepped aside. And amazingly, my own subordinate, no easy catch, couldn't even inflict a scratch on you."

A silence hung between them.

"When I faced three unknown people in Tainu's secret warehouse, one of them pushed me back using only a sword, without infusing it with the power of the Awakener or sword energy, and then disappeared. Later, while escaping from Tainu, I briefly collaborated with another Awakener who warned me that among pursuing Peletta knights, there's one who has reached the pinnacle of swordsmanship. Is that you?"

The identity of this temporary ally was clearly Nahan, who had fled from Nathan.

Nathan remained silent. Yet, Aton's lips twisted as if he had heard an answer.

“What a waste. Makunata, with such tremendous talent, not living as a child of the moon but wasting his life here.”

The children of the moon. Yuder recalled Nathan Zuckerman once mentioning that the people of the southern countries referred to themselves in this way. It was the first time he actually heard it.

“So?” Nathan finally retorted.

“What are you trying to say?”

“Why aren’t you seeking your kin, who may still be living under the desert sand? Wouldn’t Makunata, if alive, have wished to return across the desert?”

So, Aton wanted to ask Nathan Zuckerman why, as a fellow Southerner, he was siding with the Cavalry and Duke Peletta. Realizing that he was a precious swordmaster yet hiding this fact, Aton might have thought of various conspiracy theories, even if he wasnt particularly clever.

He might be thinking that Nathan Zuckerman is being exploited after being forced to hide his identity… Its a plausible thought. It’s worth probing if it’s true.

The nature of ‘Makunata’ was unclear, but Zuckerman’s parents were southern warriors taken as prisoners, suggesting a connection.

Aton’s demeanor was so genuine that it might have shaken Nathan Zuckerman if he truly was a powerful being forced to live in hiding like a caged beast. His eyes showed sincere regret and anger for the other’s situation.

Aton continued his pleading.

“A river cannot flow from the bottom to the top. Stars shine brightest when together. If you wish to return across the desert, we’ll

aid you. No child of the moon would refuse a true comrade of the sword. I too am one.”

Yuder, silently observing, reflected anew on what he knew of Zuckerman.

In his past life, Yuder had realized Zuckerman’s prowess when he accidentally encountered his aura during a fight. Back then, unaware of Kishiar also being a swordmaster, Yuder couldn’t fathom why Zuckerman continued to serve as an adjutant, concealing his true identity.

Honestly, I had no interest at all.

Even dealing with Kishiar alone was burdensome enough, let alone concerning himself with the affairs of Nathan Zuckerman, who served under Kishiar. At best, he had only entertained the thought of one day defeating Zuckerman.

But now, he knew both Kishiar’s true capabilities and the reasons for keeping them hidden. Considering Nathan Zuckerman’s genuine loyalty, it seemed likely he didnt consider revealing himself important in a situation where his lord had to hide his entire existence and power for a greater cause.

Yuder didnt think Nathan Zuckerman would respond to such a proposition, but since he didnt know his entire life story, he couldnt be sure and thus tensed up.

Finally, Nathan Zuckerman slowly spoke.

“An offer not even worth listening to.”

“What?”

“It seems like you don’t even expect me to accept it. Why waste time talking? Are you waiting for someone to come to your rescue?”

Aton’s expression shifted.

Zuckerman, observing his face, continued calmly.

To answer you… I am not, but my parents were children of the moon. So, I am aware that only those born under the desert sands and who have cried their first in that land can be called children of the moon. As proof, you also dont consider me as one of your kin, hence you keep calling me Makunata. A fragment of a fallen star. Useless like garbage, a worthless trace.

Aton fell silent. Yuder was somewhat surprised to realize the deeper, more derogatory meaning of ‘Makunata’.

“Even if there are others sharing my parents’ blood, I have no intention of returning there. I’ve long decided where I belong.”

Yuder looked into Zuckerman’s deep blue eyes, uttering those words with conviction. He felt he could almost palpably understand Zuckerman’s emotions and predict his next words.

“My name is not Makunata; it’s Nathan Zuckerman. Following you, I’d be nothing but a half-breed trash named ‘Makunata’, but here, I can honorably serve a master who respects me for who I am. The choice is obvious, no need to say it.”

Zuckerman’s gaze was calm and steady, free of any fear or hesitation, radiating the confidence of someone who had long decided his path. Aton’s expression twisted in realization.

“Seems you’re thoroughly brainwashed, unfortunately.”

“…”

“I made the offer because it’s a waste of talent, but if that’s your decision, so be it. Understood.”

“Sir Zuckerman.”

Yuder called out in a low voice, sensing something suspicious in Aton’s overly composed demeanor.

“Let’s end this…”

“I didn’t come here unprepared, as you might think. Yes, I was indeed buying time.”

Before Yuder could finish, Aton spoke, admitting to the tactic, prompting Zuckerman to question.

“Even if more of your rescue party comes, they won’t be able to save you.”

“True. I now fully acknowledge that you are skilled enough to have such confidence.”

‘What is he planning?’

The surroundings were eerily quiet for a rescue party to be expected. No signs of them were detected.

In such a situation, where he was caught and overpowered, what could he possibly be thinking?

Yuder raised his alertness, ready to act at any moment, and looked at the ring on his hand. At a signal, the other pair of rings worn by Kishiar would respond.

“It’s surprising that you know so much about us. Yet, despite knowing that we’ve been meeting and dealing with Duke Tain for years, you seem not to fully grasp the reason.”

“Don’t even think about playing tricks. I’ll cut off your head immediately.”

Nathan Zuckerman warned softly, gripping the hilt of his sword. He was someone who could make good on that threat any time. Aton knew this too, but he wasnt scared at all, instead, he smiled.

“No. You can’t do that. It seems about time now.”

…What time?

“What do you mean?”

Echoing Yuder’s perplexed thoughts, Zuckerman pressed his sword to Aton’s neck. Blood seeped out, yet Aton’s expression remained unchanged.

Havent you ever wondered why the Second Prince of Herne died now, of all times?

To frame the Cavalry for this crime and shake the succession of Herne?

Yuder responded. Aton nodded slightly, his gaze shifting.

Yes, youre well-informed. But theres something more crucial. The incident tied down the Cavalry, and it led skilled individuals like you, including the Commander, to come out. A natural action to clear your names and investigate. I didnt expect you to reach here so quickly, though.

What was he trying to say? Yuder frowned, about to knock the man unconscious when he felt a strange vibration from his raised finger.

Yuder saw his ring shining and trembling. Turning his head, he saw Nathan Zuckerman observing his own bracelet with a peculiar expression. His bracelet, too, was quivering and glowing like Yuder’s.

These paired magic tools could communicate with each other.

Since they hadnt initiated contact, it must have come from the other side.

Kishiar.

His heart, previously fearless, suddenly sank with a heavy thud.

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Chapter 718

“What have you done? Speak,” demanded Nathan Zuckerman, thrusting his sword into Aton’s shoulder without hesitation. Blood splattered, soaking the earth a dark crimson. Aton’s body instinctively twisted in agony, yet instead of screaming, he returned a chilling gaze to the two men.

“This land harbors all the conditions for endless imbalance. Those targeting you are not only us, and what we did was merely add to the inevitable repercussions of imbalance that would have occurred someday with them. Today was the day it all came together, earning the right to be called the land of the black moon. If you’re curious, go see for yourself what has become of it!”

Before he could finish, Aton’s head was violently smashed into the ground as if trampled by someone. Unsurprisingly, it was Yuder, his hands wrapped in the force of the wind.

“Augh…!” Aton struggled desperately to lift his head buried in the dirt. No matter how much he pushed with his limbs, the invisible pressure of the wind was overpowering, feeling like being crushed under the foot of a giant. The sensation of the earth mangling his face, filling his nose and mouth, was no less intense than the pain of the sword biting into his shoulder blade. His consciousness began to blur.

“Huh…!” Moments later, Aton finally escaped the crushing pressure on the back of his head. Yuder Aile, wearing a glowing ring, appeared in his blurred vision. Blood streaming from Atons broken nose and injured eyes.

Contrary to what Aton expected, Yuder’s face was expressionless, not showing any sign of the tremendous power he

had just exerted. It was all the more unnerving how inhumanly impassive he seemed, as if he had no heart at all. Slowly, Yuder opened his mouth.

“This is too uninteresting for me to indulge. Don’t even think about using such rhetoric to deceive anyone again. I would never fall for it.”

Thump. Once again, a tremendous pressure crushed Aton’s entire body. He felt his limbs shatter and lost consciousness.

Nathan Zuckerman spoke up beside Yuder, who had just subdued Aton.

“I’ve just twisted my bracelet to send a signal from our side. There’s no significant change yet, but you should try as well, Sir Aile.”

“Understood.”

Yuder removed his ring. During the time he listened to Aton’s nonsense, the ring’s vibration had ceased, now as quiet as if its previous response had been a dream. He studied the tiny magic circle inside for a moment and then brushed it with his fingertip.

Once, twice, and then a third time.

Gold light briefly flared from the magic circle on the ring, then faded. Nathan Zuckerman, having observed Yuder’s actions, began to tend to the unconscious Aton.

“You know, the Duke has the power to surpass us both if he so wishes. So, there’s no need to make hasty assumptions just because our two magic tools reacted simultaneously.”

“Yes. I share the same thought.”

Despite his heart still racing with unease, Yuder knew just how formidable a person Kishiar was.

Kishiar had told Yuder to use the ring as a means of rescue, but that didn't necessarily mean Yuder had to use it for that purpose.

"It seems certain something has happened at the Cavalry branch, but such a situation might also pose a threat to us. So, we chose the quickest way to assess our situation, considering it might be the same here."

The fact that both Yuder's ring and Nathan Zuckerman's bracelet, two magic tools, had reacted simultaneously bolstered their speculation. It was a distinct possibility. Nathan Zuckerman nodded silently in agreement and responded.

"Or, it could be due to the use of magic. Magic tools are designed to respond to the innate magic power inherent in all humans, however slight, making them extremely sensitive to magic forces. I have heard it's quite common for magic tools to malfunction in the presence of large concentrations of magic power."

"I see. I wasn't aware of that…"

"In that case, I will follow after taking care of things here. Sir Aile, please go ahead."

Yuder hesitated for a moment.

"Is that alright?"

"You possess the power to move faster than me, don't you? And if it's related to the Cavalry, it would be better if Sir Aile goes."

Nathan Zuckerman, too, must have been eager to rush to Kishiar's side. Yet his words carried a clear intention of consideration, beyond a cold assessment of the situation.

Perhaps he had stepped back to allow Yuder to go first, even though their lord, Kishiar, might be in danger. The significance of this gesture struck Yuder with an intense and unfamiliar force.

"…"

It was a trust different from what he shared with his comrades. Yet, in matters concerning Kishiar, it felt even more profound and weighty.

Yuder looked intently at Nathan Zuckerman and then bowed his head.

"Understood."

"I'll follow shortly."

Yuder stepped onto the wind and leaped from the ground. In just two or three bounds, he soared over the high walls of the Conche estate, disappearing onto distant rooftops. Nathan Zuckerman watched his retreating figure and then turned around.

Without taking a breath, Yuder leaped twice into the air, bounding towards the temple spire. Chimneys that blocked his path were leaped over effortlessly, and he ignored the screams of someone hanging laundry on a rooftop. Even when his foot nearly slipped on the broken edge of a roof, he kept his eyes fixed forward.

Having arrived at the Conche estate by carriage, he wasn't exactly sure how far or in which direction the Cavalry branch was located, but he didn't need to ponder. The moment he started running wildly, stepping on the wind as if mad, a thin thread appeared before him, just like that time.

That thing that always appeared whenever Yuder Aile wished to find Kishiar La Orr.

The thread, wrapping around Yuder's body and extending into the distance, seemed fragile enough to break with a breath. Yet, it was more distinct than when he first saw it, and instead of a single strand, there were now several.

The existence of this thread meant Kishiar was still alive.

At the end of it, Kishiar would surely be there.

'No matter what has happened, as long as he is there… I can handle it.'

That was enough. He thought so, but while his mind tried to remain calm and rational, his heart continued to race with unease. His nerves felt unbearably sharp, as if wringing his brain.

Thus, Yuder decided to contemplate Aton's words while running.

This land harbors all the conditions for endless imbalance. Those targeting you are not only us, and what we did was merely add to the inevitable repercussions of imbalance that would have occurred someday with them.

Then there was the mention of the 'Land of the Black Moon'.

The southern people were known to still hold the belief in the Black Moon, chased away by the Sun God. But this was the first time he had directly heard that name from them.

Imbalance… What does it mean for the land to have been imbalanced from the beginning? Does adding an aftereffect imply making the already unbalanced land even more so? And then, what happens?

Finally, the distinctive, worn rooftop of the Cavalry's Southern Branch came into view, not too far away. Yuder, following the

swaying threads as if they were leading him, ran faster. Suddenly, he halted, noticing something.

“There it is…”

The sounds akin to explosions near the Cavalry’s branch didn’t bother him.

Neither the sight of people gathering nor those fleeing was of concern. After all, he had no great fear when it came to dealing with humans.

But,

What was that jet-black line hanging in the sky?

It looked like a cracked vessel, its endlessly split mouth agape.

Yuder had seen something like this before.

“…A crack in the sky.”

It was akin to the crack he had witnessed in the Great Sarain Forest in the West, now floating in front of the Cavalry’s branch.

In his previous life, a crack was often seen just before a great calamity struck. And the first time it was noticed by people, in Yuder’s memory, was…

The Great Southern Earthquake.

Suddenly, Aton’s words about the aftermath of an imbalance flashed through Yuder’s mind.

A chill ran down his spine, feeling as if his blood had turned cold.

Yuder, who had paused momentarily, started running again. With more speed and greater force, responding to his desire to exert more

power, the energy surged like a small whirlwind.

With the whirlwind lifting him from below, Yuder finally reached near the top of the Cavalry's branch. Up close, the rift seemed even more vast and ominous.

And then, the figure standing below it.

The very person he had been searching for was there.

A man with golden hair, holding a long sword, seemed to notice Yuder's approach and lifted his head, meeting his gaze precisely. The threads that had led Yuder ended right above his red irises.

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Side Story

<The Day Before It Began>

“In that case, I will follow after taking care of things here. Sir Aile, please go ahead.”

When Nathan Zuckerman uttered these words, he was seized by an unusual sentiment.

Such a statement would have been unthinkable for him in the past.

Currently, in a critical situation where his sole lord and master, the one and only object of his loyalty, might be in danger, it was unthinkable to send someone else ahead while staying behind. To those who knew Nathan Zuckerman, it would have been obvious.

However, these words were not spoken impulsively. They were infused with clear rational judgment, trust, and an unspoken intention.

Would the black-haired man before him understand the weight and meaning behind Nathan Zuckerman’s words? Nathan quickly dismissed such thoughts as unnecessary.

The man in question, Yuder Aile, who had never once shown surprise or dismay in the face of enemies, hesitated for the first time.

Finally, Yuder Aile cautiously, yet deliberately, met Nathan Zuckerman’s gaze and asked, “Is that alright?”

This question was not born of a lack of confidence in his position or out of concern for Nathan Zuckerman’s feelings.

The expression fleeting across his slightly dirtied pale face seemed to understand more about the significance and incredibility of Nathan Zuckerman's statement than Nathan himself.

The question was possible because of their mutual understanding and the values they both held dear, encapsulating a strange yet profound respect and trust.

The man before him understood the elements that Nathan Zuckerman valued to an almost unbelievable extent.

At that moment, Nathan Zuckerman managed to completely resolve the unusual sentiment he had felt. His gaze, regaining its usual calmness, rested on Yuder Aile's face.

"You possess the power to move faster than me, don't you? And if it's related to the Cavalry, it would be better if Sir Aile goes."

It was a purely rational judgment. No matter how far Nathan Zuckerman's physical abilities and swordsmanship surpassed those of ordinary men, it was difficult to move faster than someone who could leap upon the wind and cross the skies. Moreover, in terms of skill, Yuder was one of the few in the world whom even a swordmaster like Nathan Zuckerman could not easily confront.

And furthermore

Though unspoken, both men were aware of another reason.

The relationship between Kishiar La Orr and Yuder Aile.

Nathan Zuckerman's only lord held the black-haired man before him in the highest regard, more than anything in the world. Who else could understand what that meant as well as Nathan Zuckerman?

He remembered a scene he had witnessed recently during Yuder Aile's unexpected heat period. His lord had held Yuder, growling like

a beast deprived of its senses, tenderly yet securely, sitting quietly in the darkness of a rocky crevice, ensuring no harm came to him.

The look in his eyes, filled with gentle reassurance yet unmistakable sorrow.

Without saying a word, his inability to take his eyes off Yuder clearly revealed to Nathan Zuckerman what Yuder meant to Kishiar.

Yuder Aile had become, was, and would continue to be Kishiar's only exception.

However, it was crucial that this was not just a one-sided feeling on Kishiar's part. To Yuder Aile, Kishiar was also the only one. The attitude Yuder displayed during his heat period, fiercely desiring Kishiar in his delirious state, was not something that sprung from nowhere. Beneath his seemingly calm and cool demeanor, Nathan Zuckerman had always glimpsed a similar flame flickering in his wild eyes.

That intense, raw flame, never shown to others, even made Nathan hesitate briefly when he caught a glimpse of it. His lord had accepted it with great joy.

Something unimaginable from their usual demeanor naturally flowed between them when together. Despite knowing each other for less than a year, the depth and breadth of their relationship felt as vast and unfathomable as an ocean, often surprising Nathan with its intensity.

Understood.

In the silence, Yuder, who had been intently looking at Nathan, slowly nodded his head. It was not a mere acknowledgment but a clear gesture of gratitude for Nathan's decision.

"I'll follow shortly."

Someone had to stay behind to handle the aftermath here. Given his experience, Nathan's choice was undoubtedly the best.

Nathan Zuckerman watched quietly as Yuder swiftly disappeared, stepping into the wind. His thoughts drifted back to his time in Peletta, specifically to the time when Kishiar faced constant threats of death.

Nathan. Repel everyone inside the castle and get out. That's an order.

The day had begun under an ominous sky. Dark clouds shrouded the heavens, and an unusually sticky breeze pressed unpleasantly against the skin. The terrible pain from a recently cracked vessel had worsened, and Kishiar, lying in bed, looked so haggard it was difficult to bear seeing his eyes open.

His eyes, bloodshot from days of sleeplessness, were deeply sunken. His face, so thin that not a hint of flesh seemed left, was shrouded in an unmistakable shadow of death. The smell of rotten blood, which he had been coughing up for days, clung to his body, refusing to dissipate no matter what.

Struggling to maintain his sanity amidst the chaos, Kishiars famed beauty still shone through, eerily reminiscent of a candle flickering before it extinguishes.

With great effort, Kishiar shifted his shadow-draped eyes to look at Nathan Zuckerman, gasping for breath. Between his labored breaths, the sound of boiling blood could be heard.

Go out… as I mentioned before. Cough… Cough.

Your Grace.

…Go! It seems it will start soon

As he spoke, blood burst from his nose and eyes, a sign of worsening condition. Kishiar stopped Nathan Zuckerman from approaching with an outstretched hand and then coughed violently for a long time. It was a struggle to swallow the screams of agony and meet his end with some semblance of humanity.

Nathan Zuckerman had never once disobeyed his orders immediately. But that time, for the first time, he hesitated to follow the command.

However, Kishiar, as if reading the reason for his hesitation, raised his head and shouted clearly.

Why are you still here? …Your last duty isnt to stay by my side! No need to answer. Go!

Confronted with Kishiar's unmistakably disappointed gaze, Nathan Zuckerman clenched his teeth and turned away. He realized it was time to accept that he could no longer do anything for his lord.

Kishiar had wanted to be alone at the moment of his death. Knowing the cases of previous imperial family members who had walked a similar path, the stronger the inherent power, the more horrific and intense the backlash at the end. Nathan knew that if Kishiar's vessel, strong and diverse in power, were to break completely, it could potentially bring down the entirety of Peletta Castle.

Therefore, he had previously instructed Nathan Zuckerman on what needed to be done when the time came. Nathan Zuckerman gathered the few who remained in the castle and led them outside. Afterward, he had to evacuate those gathered outside the castle gates, worried about the Duke, and prepare the knights to guard against any unforeseen aftermath.

"Please leave. The Duke has given his orders."

“Ah…”

The only ones left in the castle were essential servants, a few Peletta Knights, and a handful of retainers. They were fiercely loyal to Kishiar but remained unaware of the true reason behind their young Duke’s prolonged suffering and imminent death. They vaguely assumed it to be an incurable and dangerous illness.

Kishiar had prearranged for those remaining in the castle to leave the moment his orders were given, preparing for his death. Most cooperated, but that did not mean they fully understood the situation.

Its unthinkable that no one can be with the Duke at his deathbed

Despite being prepared, when the moment arrived, none could move calmly. Only one person among them understood the cause and consequence of this situation: Hellem, the mage who had been with Kishiar since he came to Peletta. She sighed, “So it has come to this…” and helped Nathan Zuckerman with a calm demeanor. Without her, the process would have taken much longer.

The loyal knight, unmoved by the others’ questions or grief, solemnly closed the castle gate and looked up at the ashen sky.

The dark clouds, now heavier, occasionally flashed with lightning, casting an ominous, blood-red light. This sight deepened the people’s sense of dread and sorrow. Only a terrible silence interspersed with muffled sobs filled the air. Yet no one dared to suggest re-entering the castle.

The reason was simple: it was against Kishiar’s wishes.

Nathan Zuckerman, amidst a storm of pain, silently gazed at Peletta Castle.

Kishiar La Orr, to the very end, made a choice true to himself to protect others, to die in a somewhat humane manner, and be

remembered as such.

In such circumstances, who could have reversed the lord's decision and entered the castle? Even if Kishiar himself would have accepted it, would he really?

Even if the Emperor and Empress had been there, they wouldn't have opened the castle gates.

But what about Yuder Aile?

If he had been in the same situation, could he have opened the gates?

Nathan Zuckerman, watching the small figure of Yuder Aile disappearing into the distance, quietly answered himself.

'He would have.'

Yuder would have opened the gates without a second thought. This was a judgment close to certainty, formed from the time he spent observing Yuder Aile.

That's why Nathan Zuckerman had chosen to yield. And after finishing his tasks here, he planned to follow and see once more how right his judgment had been.

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Chapter 719

Kishiar.

As long as he is alive, as long as his life clings on, the rest could somehow be handled.

Yuder had repeated this to himself countless times as he hurried. Whether it was due to his wishes or not, Kishiar was indeed alive, standing on his own feet, seemingly unharmed.

But to say he was in the same state as before would be incorrect.

Kishiar’s previously uncreased clothes were now stained with dirt and smudges. In some places, faint traces of red blood were visible. It seemed less like his own blood and more like splatters from somewhere else. The mere fact that he was wielding a sword stained with blood made Yuder feel a heavy, dark sensation in his chest. His head grew cold, and his heart beat rapidly, yet disquietingly.

In that brief moment, Yuder, who had scanned Kishiar from head to toe, noticed that Kishiar was also gazing intently at him from afar. Kishiar’s red eyes clearly noticed Yuder’s dirty cheeks and the torn clothes from battle, yet unlike Yuder, he didn’t show his emotions openly.

“Yuder!”

“Where?”

“Over there, on the roof! Yuder is here!”

At that moment, people around, who had turned to see what Kishiar was looking at, spotted Yuder and began pointing and

shouting. Only then did Yuder realize that he was not alone with Kishiar; there were numerous people around them.

It was in front of the Southern branch of the Cavalry, so it was natural for many people to be there, but Yuder had seen nothing but Kishiar. This realization brought a sense of absurdity and, with it, a return of rational thought.

“Sigh…”

Yuder exhaled deeply and began to scrutinize below more sharply and thoroughly.

Among the many around Kishiar, some wore the uniforms of the Cavalry, others were in imperial military attire. So far, it was understandable, but there was an unusually high number of people in civilian clothes, armed with weapons.

Those in civilian attire within the branch were mostly Cavalry applicants or those who had yet to be formally admitted.

‘But there aren’t that many of them, are there?’

Most of those in civilian clothes, not mingling with the Cavalry or the imperial army, stood opposite Kishiar, as if in a standoff, weapons in hand.

Strangely, even among these opposing groups, there was a vague division into two factions.

‘What’s going on?’

The atmosphere was chaotic, as if a battle had taken place. Yuder, realizing that further observation would be futile, leaped down, stepping on the wind. As the wind tousled his hair and clothes, he landed softly, quietly observing the writhing dark crack in the air.

“Ah!”

Those who seemed to see Yuder leap from such a height for the first time uttered sounds of either astonishment or alarm.

Yuder, seemingly oblivious to the glances of those concerned about his legs, strode forward with long steps. His demeanor was so cold that those who tried to approach and call out to him dared not interfere. Naturally, his destination was where Kishiar stood.

“…”

Despite the multitude of thoughts and surging emotions he had felt while running, when he finally faced Kishiar, he found himself speechless. It felt strangely like a long-awaited reunion, even though they had only been apart for a few hours.

Instead of words like ‘glad you are safe’ or ‘I was worried when the magic tool suddenly activated,’ the only thing that slipped out between his lips was a single word.

“…Commander.”

Upon hearing the faint call, like a sigh, Kishiar slowly lowered his eyes and smiled. In that moment, as their gazes met, Yuder realized there was no need for further words.

Kishiar already knew everything Yuder intended to say.

“Did you return because of the abnormal condition of the magic tool?”

“…Yes.”

“I see. You must have been quite startled. Unexpected events here caused some of my magic tools to react on their own. As you can see, there hasn’t been any serious issue so far.”

Indeed, the activation of the magic tool was not a distress signal. The fact that Nathan Zuckerman's speculation was correct brought Yuder a sense of relief. The sharp, knife-like atmosphere that had enveloped him finally began to calm down.

Yuder's gaze fell on the sword Kishiar was holding. It was the divine sword Orr, wrapped in cloth around the handle, which he had not drawn since leaving the capital. Was the situation here so dire that he had to unsheathe his divine sword?

"It seems a battle took place. Could you tell me what happened?"

"Before that, I'd like to know why the one who promised not to get hurt left in such a disheveled state."

Kishiar gestured with his eyes towards Yuder's torn clothes.

"Could you tell me how it came to be like this?"

Though smiling softly, his eyes indicated that he wouldn't move on to another topic without first getting an answer to this matter.

"…That is."

How could Yuder explain in a way that wouldn't discomfort Kishiar that he ended up in this state after a fight with southern merchants he had encountered? Moreover, the memory of the candies given by Kishiar, now shattered to pieces, almost reignited his anger toward the men he had beaten to the point of fainting.

'Don't think about it. Dwelling on it now won't help the situation.'

Yuder pushed the memory of the candies deep inside and began to speak.

"I found the missing servant and horse of Duke Herne's second son, and the Southern merchants we were pursuing. They were

indeed all in cahoots.”

Deciding that swift suppression was better than just observing and returning, Yuder had engaged in combat. Amidst the unsettling words spouted by Aton, who seemed to be their leader, and the sudden abnormality of the magic tools, he had hurried back. Kishiar nodded, listening to Yuder’s objective, concise explanation.

“So it was as expected. Then Nathan is handling the aftermath?”

“Yes. Sir Zuckerman said he would follow shortly.”

“Good. I trust Nathan. This confirms the connection between what happened here and their involvement.”

After responding, Kishiar paused to look at Yuder before continuing.

“Securing evidence and witnesses instead of just observing them was a wise decision. It was somewhat reckless, of course, but we can discuss that in detail after this matter is resolved.”

Kishiar must have immediately understood why Yuder made such a decision. Still, as Yuder hadn’t perfectly adhered to the command to avoid injury, he bowed his head without a word.

“Yes.”

“Nevertheless, I am even more pleased that, just as I was worrying about you both due to the strange happenings here, as if you read my mind, I get to see your face again.”

Kishiar let out a small sigh and smiled.

The tension in the air, frozen from the worry that the conversation between Kishiar and Yuder might escalate, melted away instantly with his gentle smile.

“Phew. What a relief. I was wondering where Yuder had gone, but it turns out the Commander had sent him.”

“Anyway, with the arrival of the best of our Cavalry, it’s the end for them now!”

Yuder turned his gaze upon hearing the bellicose voices around him, to assess the plainly dressed people standing in opposition.

‘Are they all Awakeners, as I thought?’

They seemed utterly bewildered by Yuder’s sudden descent from the sky. Although it was difficult to discern at a glance, Yuder had noticed from above that there were two distinct groups among them, each with a slightly different atmosphere.

The first group appeared eager to turn and flee at any moment, their eyes betraying anxiety amidst low curses and conversations resembling signals.

The second group, however, was generally very quiet. They stood in vigilance and silence, their hands tightly gripping weapons or fists, ready to spring into action. Among them were a few individuals thoroughly cloaked from head to toe.

‘Are they the ones Aton mentioned… the ones targeting us? Whether it’s just some of them or all, I’m still unsure.’

As he made these observations, Kishiar spoke at just the right moment.

“Those people are the first and second batch of today’s test applicants who entered our branch early this morning. Or, ‘were’ would be more accurate to say.”

Before the news of Duke Herne’s second son’s death brought knights storming into the southern branch of the Cavalry, there were

already applicants present. While the knights had searched the premises, they didn’t excessively scrutinize or question these applicants. Their priority was to find any trace of Duke Herne’s son, his servant, and their horse, which might be hidden somewhere in the branch. They also considered it highly unlikely that the culprits were commoners or foreigners, who wouldn’t even know who Duke Herne’s son was.

After Kishiar and Yuder left with the knights to see the body of Duke Herne’s son, all operations at the Cavalry branch were temporarily suspended. The members supervising the applications and tests apologized to the applicants and ceased their work until the Commander’s return.

Everyone, forced into an abrupt break, had nothing to do but gather in small groups and discuss the ominous incident.

Under normal circumstances, the Cavalry would stick with their own, applicants with other applicants, and imperial soldiers with other imperial soldiers, chatting among familiar faces. However, in the face of a horrifying and shocking murder, such distinctions became meaningless. The majority of those inside the branch were outside due to the investigation, contributing to this mingling.

Without exception, they all mixed together, sharing their worries and speculations. They wondered if anyone had seen anything suspicious, or if there had been any odd occurrences since the day before. Among them were those who had just yesterday been discussing the legend of Yuder Aile.

Among them, a young boy named Jack, who had narrowly escaped a duel with Yuder Aile, suddenly seemed to remember something and cautiously spoke up.

Well, now that I think about it… I saw someone the other day while walking… someone who shouldn’t be here. That’s the only suspicious thing I can think of

Someone who shouldn’t be here?

But I might be mistaken. It’s just too unbelievable

Who is it, Jack?

Jack hesitated, wondering if he should speak, then responded softly.

It’s, uh, Sera… my sister.

What? Sera?

Impossible!

Those who had escaped with Jack from the Star of Nagran’s southern stronghold unanimously rebutted his statement. Then, a young Awakener who had gone with Jack to submit an application to the underground fighting arena that day timidly raised his hand with a subdued voice.

“I saw it too. At first, I thought I was mistaken and didn’t say anything… but if Jack saw it too, it must be true.”

“…Really? In this world?”

“Could it be that she followed us here…”

“But, actually, I was more concerned about someone else rather than Sera…”

“Someone else? Who else did you see?”

The young Awakener hesitated, then, gathering his courage, he finally spoke.

“Before I met all of you… I was briefly in the Central region.”

Although he spoke vaguely, those affiliated with the Star of Nagran immediately understood what he meant. It implied that before coming to the southern and western strongholds, the boy had briefly stayed in the central stronghold.

“That time… I think I saw those people from there… this morning, when I stepped out briefly. Among the applicants…”

“What? Really?”

“No, what are you all talking about? South? Central? Sera? What does all this mean? Are you saying you saw some suspicious people we don’t know about?”

Those unaware of their origins were puzzled, trying to understand, while the former the Star of Nagran Awakeners were momentarily caught in their own astonishment.

Had it been before, they would have never revealed their origins to the Cavalry. However, the situation had changed; the children who had nearly died in the secret fighting arena had safely returned, and the Cavalry had not blamed them, instead offering them a way to live. This instilled a newfound sense of trust in their hearts.

Crucially, those who remembered the conversation from the day before exchanged glances and nodded firmly.

“That is…”

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Chapter 720

Speaking the truth was always a challenging task, especially when many were involved, and any misstep could endlessly spread the blame. This made silence seem like the better option.

Nevertheless, the Awakeners of the Star of Nagran, showing courage, broke their silence.

“We’ve been together since we came to support this cause, a fact well-known to many. Earlier, out of fear, we couldn’t disclose where we came from, but in truth, we are… escapees from a group where only the Awakeners lived.”

“A group of only Awakeners? Does such a thing exist?”

While the Cavalry members intertwined with the Star of Nagran in the west fell silent, sensing something familiar, the imperial special forces, unaware of this, looked puzzled. When one of them asked with a perplexed expression, Dagon, the young man named as their leader and who had brought them here, nodded.

“Yes. It’s a place formed in secret by those who, after awakening, fled persecution in their hometowns. There are a few stronghold villages with their own rules. At first, we thought it a safe haven, but over time, it didn’t feel entirely secure.”

And so, those with shared convictions secretly gathered and journeyed here, spurred by news that the Cavalry was recruiting new members.

After explaining how they arrived, Dagon continued with a somber expression.

“Not all at our former home wanted a quiet life away from the outside world. Some believed we should use our powers to gain nobility’s recognition and ensure complete safety. Others, and it’s hard to say, thought that having become powerful, we should… stand above the non-Awakener, or rather, the nobility.”

His risky statement shifted the mood drastically. Dagon, understanding their reaction, nodded. The beads of sweat on his forehead indicated the difficulty with which he spoke these words.

“The reason we were startled by the people the children saw is that they would never leave that group, especially being spotted near a Cavalry branch… It’s unbelievable. They must have a sinister agenda. Especially Sera… She was a temporary leader of a stronghold. Why would she come here?”

The decisive reason for the southern stronghold escapees, including Dagon, to leave was Sera’s overly close dealings with southern merchants during the sage’s absence.

Sera, naturally anxious, grew worried when communication from the sage’s side in the capital ceased, fearing she’d have no way to defend the southern stronghold in an emergency.

Although it was a tense time, with Nahan, who seemed like a disruptive element within the group, leaving with his followers, the atmosphere was incredibly tense between those sympathetic to his ideas and the sage’s followers. Sera, who blindly believed and revered anything the sage said, couldn’t properly mediate the internal conflict, and the situation worsened by the day.

Then the southern merchants arrived in the village. Initially, they seemed to be looking for Nahan, but even after learning he had left, they strangely remained at the stronghold.

Although the intentions were unclear, it was customary in the Star of Nagran to accept any Awakener, so their actions were tolerated.

Frankly, as the atmosphere worsened day by day, it was difficult to pay much attention to them.

As the internal strife continued, injuries inevitably began to occur. Those Awakeners who desired only to live peacefully felt greatly threatened by this development. It was around this time that people began leaving the village quietly.

Up until then, Dagon had not considered leaving the village. But then…

“A monster suddenly appeared, putting the village in peril. It was a problem that could have been easily resolved if we had united our strengths, as usual… But Sera, distrusting each other, started seeking external help,” he explained.

Sera, a follower of the sage, judged it too dangerous to unite with those following Nahan amidst the monster threat. She feared they might not fight properly, betray them, or stab them in the back.

Therefore, she chose to ally with the southern merchants instead of Nahan’s followers and successfully repelled the monster.

This incident shocked both the sage’s and Nahan’s factions. The sage’s followers realized they could protect the village without Nahan’s people, while Nahan’s faction was enraged at being excluded.

The southern merchants rapidly became closer with Sera, even inviting their colleagues to the village. People expressed discontent over this sudden development without explanation, but those who did were branded as Nahan’s followers and faced cold stares. Some were even confined to their homes for breaking the stronghold’s rules.

While the original southern stronghold residents might have been oblivious, those from the western stronghold, including Dagon, found

the situation incomprehensible. They didn’t want to take sides and also found the southern merchants suspicious.

At this time, a letter from a former comrade, Robel, about the Cavalry’s recruitment, came as a much-needed oasis. Robel, unlike the vague external rumors, provided practical information as someone involved with the Cavalry.

Eventually, they left the village, leading them to their current situation.

Dagon didn’t mention names like Nahan or the sage directly in his story, but otherwise, he spoke quite candidly.

“I believe you can now roughly guess why we were startled and suspicious. Sera always spoke ill of the Cavalry, accusing them of persecuting us. If she’s not here to capture us, her purpose is hard to fathom. It’s unlikely to be anything favorable to the Cavalry.”

“That makes sense. Is it the same with the central stronghold?” asked one of the Cavalry members seriously.

Dagon shook his head slightly. “I’m not sure. There might be some from there who, like us, secretly escaped to join the Cavalry. But if so, why travel all this way? It would be much quicker to head to the capital. I certainly wouldn’t have done that.”

Indeed, for those living in the central location, heading to the capital would have been much faster. There seemed to be no reason for anyone eager to escape and join the Cavalry to come south instead.

After pointing this out, Dagon hesitated for a moment before concluding his thoughts.

“Perhaps our young ones misjudged the people they saw. But in a situation where the entire Cavalry could be suspected and

endangered, I felt I couldn’t stay silent, knowing that such incidents were happening one after another. It might be helpful to find them and ascertain their purpose,” Dagon said.

Though his experience with polite speech was limited, making his manner of speaking quite awkward, the sincerity in his words was unmistakable. The other members of his party, nodding earnestly beside him, also conveyed this sincerity.

The Cavalry members looked at each other seriously. With the Cavalry Commander, Yuder, and Kurga, who had led in their absence, all missing, it was now up to them to make a decision.

Should they believe this story? Or should they doubt their identity and intentions?

Should they wait for the Commander to return? Or should they verify it right away?

“It must have been a tough decision. But in the end, everyone decided not to overlook the story and went to see the applicants,” Kishiar, who had relayed the events so far to Yuder, said with a faint smile.

“Isn’t it admirable? In a situation where the Cavalry was deemed in danger, they didn’t just wait but actively sought what they could do, showing how much they’ve grown.”

“Commander…”

The faces of the surrounding members flushed with embarrassment at Kishiar’s praise, resembling dogs that expected to be scolded but were instead commended.

Well… Certainly, such initiative would have been unimaginable before.

It’s not wise to just wait for the higher-ups to return. The Cavalry, comprised of a few elite soldiers, had a completely different set of expected behaviors compared to regular soldiers, whose existence and best course of action typically involved following the commands of their superiors.

Yuder glanced at his colleagues and then spoke with a softened demeanor.

“So, what happened then?”

“It turned out that there were more Awakeners from the Star of Nagran’s central stronghold among the applicants than initially thought. They pretended to be from different regions and used aliases to apply. At first, they denied it, but when the members and successful applicants acted in unison, they were deceived and revealed their purpose.”

They managed to do all that? Yuder looked at the members again. The previously Awakeners of the Star of Nagran, who had been peeking out, suddenly became extremely bashful when their eyes met Yuder’s.

“…To set such a perfect trap, you guys have done something remarkable.”

“Right?”

Kishiar’s smile deepened.

“Their purpose was to infiltrate the Cavalry under someone’s orders. Who exactly gave the orders is still unclear, but we’ll find out soon enough.”

Who else would give orders to infiltrate the Cavalry from the Star of Nagran?

Yuder, thinking of the sage, responded.

“…I see.”

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Chapter 721

The events that followed were easily inferred without hearing them. Those who claimed to have come from the central stronghold of the Star of Nagran were likely bewildered and panicked, having their identities and intentions thoroughly exposed before they could even infiltrate the Cavalry.

“The Star of Nagran, even if belonging to the same group, members from different strongholds barely know each other. With internal strife brewing beneath the surface and the Cavalry’s recruitment of new members causing upheaval, coordination in such a situation was unlikely.”

It was Yuder who had anticipated the likelihood of their downfall due to internal conflicts, based on memories from his previous life. And it was Kishiar who had spread the news of the massive second batch recruitment of members without conditions, and had planned to weaken the Sages and Nahans group by leaking the list of the Cavalry’s collaborators.

Now, these predictions and plans were coming to fruition, benefiting them as expected.

Yuder looked at the faces of his colleagues and the former Awakener members of the Star of Nagran, who were smiling despite being embarrassed.

He had already guessed from the west that the sage would start acting seriously from his stronghold in the south. The original plan was to weed out the applicants in the south before leaving and clean up the surroundings.

But he hadn’t anticipated that things would be resolved in this manner before he even made his move. It felt quite novel to him,

especially the method used for selection being a ruse. Even Yuder, had he been here, would not have thought of such a tactic.

The ruse conducted by the southern branch members and the successful applicants of the Star of Nagran was, in fact, quite simple.

First, the successful applicants loitered near the Awakeners from the central stronghold, dropping conversations that hinted they were from the same Star of Nagran. Then, the members acted as if the situation in the Cavalry was dire, sneakily leaking fake information desirable to any spy, and pretending to share serious inside information with the applicants.

To the central stronghold's Awakeners, it seemed as if these applicants were on the same mission as themselves and had already infiltrated the Cavalry, gathering sufficient information a perfect misdirection.

In their eagerness, these individuals approached the applicants first, unwittingly revealing their own identities and intentions. The Cavalry members successfully identified all of them without shedding a drop of blood.

If it were me, I would have just used my powers on all the applicants to quickly reveal their true colors. Even the Cavalry of my previous life would have done the same.

However, the fact that the present members chose a different method, a ruse, was probably because they had a similar experience in the west and discovered that it could be surprisingly effective.

Who had given them that experience? It was none other than Kishiar La Orr standing before them.

The fact that the same person can make entirely different choices depending on their experiences and what they learn had been

observed several times by Yuder while watching the Cavalry members, but it had never struck him as clearly as it did today.

“Anyway, yes. It was a splendid method to uncover the enemies’ identities, but before we could capture them, something unexpected happened. In fact, that’s the real cause of what’s happening right now.”

As Yuder regained his composure, Kishiar smiled and began to speak. His gaze swept over the confused enemies and the suspicious figures caught in between, their whole bodies concealed.

“All the spies we thought we had identified were accounted for, except for a southern Awakener witnessed by the successful applicants. You must have heard by now who that is, right?”

“Are you referring to the person who was the temporary leader of the southern stronghold?”

Was her name Sera? Yuder mulled over the unfamiliar name.

“Yes. Surprisingly, at the time the spies were active, she did not target this branch but aimed elsewhere. Can you guess where?”

Yuder’s mind raced.

If the children, including Jack, were not mistaken, then she must have come here with a purpose. It wouldn’t have been strange for someone entrusted with a critical mission of overseeing the stronghold in the sage’s absence not to come to this branch, especially if she wasn’t aiming to infiltrate the Cavalry. If infiltration wasn’t the goal, it would have been logical for her to assist or guide the central stronghold’s Awakeners who were unfamiliar with the south.

But instead, she targeted somewhere else at the same time?

Then why, for what reason, and where did she aim?

There was only one other plausible answer.

‘She was said to have formed close ties with the Southern merchants. And those behind the recent death of the second prince of Herne were precisely them. Considering their objective wasnt just to overturn Herne but also to frame and harm the Cavalry…’

The conclusion that the ‘others targeting the Cavalry’ Aton had mentioned after being knocked out by Yuder were the Sage and the Star of Nagran.

Reversing this line of thought, the situation appeared in a new light.

What would the Southern merchants have thought if they had early access to the sages plans in the South through their cooperative relationship with Sera? Naturally, they would have devised a way to inflict the maximum damage on the Cavalry, adding the Sage’s plans to their own schemes.

‘Once entangled in a cooperative relationship, it can intertwine two or three times more.’

The word ‘cooperation’ implies mutual support. If the Southern merchants had helped Sera and the Southern stronghold, then it meant that Sera would have also assisted the Southern merchants when they requested help.

The scenario of the Southern merchants proposing to help Sera and the Southern Stronghold again, cunningly interjecting themselves into this plan, easily formed in Yuders mind. The stronghold was already at great risk due to internal conflicts, so refusing their help would have been more surprising.

It was uncertain how much the Sage knew about the Southern merchants, but ultimately, it seemed clear that Sera had moved with them.

The Southern merchants must have known how the Star of Nagran would move and even how the Second Prince of Herne would die. The next target for them could only be one thing.

‘The people who left the Cavalry branch for a while to investigate the death of the Second Prince of Herne they had killed.’

More precisely… the center of the Cavalry, Commander Kishiar La Orr.

He was an Awakener, but his exact abilities remained unclear, and many doubted and questioned even his possession of the Divine Sword. Known to be physically frail, not very bright, foolish, and fond of frivolities, there couldnt be an easier yet impactful target.

Moreover, Kishiar had sent even his deputy Nathan Zuckerman ahead somewhere after concluding the investigation of the Second Prince of Hernes body and had boarded a carriage with only Yuder.

Yuder’s reputation had indeed soared after resolving the incident in the west, but it hadn’t reached the level of his previous life where his mere existence inspired fear. He was still a novice, not even a year into revealing his name to the world, and he had not directly confronted the Southern merchants during his time in the west. If they considered him merely an inexperienced youth to contend with, it wouldnt have been strange for them to feel confident, especially with the additional strength of Sera and others from the Southern stronghold on their side.

And in fact, even Yuder had secretly disembarked from the carriage midway.

Kishiar had been alone on his return to the branch.

The moment Yuder realized this, a chill similar to a shiver ran through his entire body. His eyes deepened, and a dark, ominous voice flowed from his parched lips.

Dont tell me, they even targeted the carriage carrying the Commander?

Although he phrased it as a possibility, his conviction was almost certain.

And as if confirming Yuders thought, Kishiar slowly nodded.

Thats correct.

A deep, silent sigh escaped. A mix of incredulity and anger bubbled up from deep within.

Knowing Kishiars true abilities, he was aware that Kishiar would not fall victim to a sudden attack. What infuriated him was the fact that he himself had not been there.

Yuder, trying his best to calm his emotions, asked,

Does the blood on your clothes also stem from that incident?

“It would seem so,” came the nonchalant reply.

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Chapter 722

Does the blood on your clothes also stem from that incident?

“It would seem so,” came the nonchalant reply.

Kishiar, upon this remark, glanced briefly at the bloodstains on his garment, acknowledging them anew. Though not a matter of great concern to him, Yuder remembered the intense pounding of his heart when he first saw those stains from afar, the memory still vivid.

As Yuder’s gaze grew increasingly cold, Kishiar explained the recent events with a smile. “After dispatching my assistant, on my way back to the branch, the carriage suddenly lost direction and started shaking uncontrollably. Then arrows came flying out of nowhere. Stepping outside, I was confronted by unfamiliar assailants.”

It would sound odd to say that sudden attacks like blind arrows piercing his carriage were common, but for Kishiar, such incidents had become almost routine. Ever since the previous Emperor’s passing, attempts on the life of Emperor Keilusa and his entourage were nearly a daily occurrence.

Even while living inconspicuously in Peletta, Kishiar faced clever assassination attempts now and then. Known as a man marked for death, there were always those who desired to hasten his end.

Within the wildly shaking carriage, Kishiar sat quietly, maintaining his balance as if he were in another world, thanks to his subtle mastery of force, an almost unreal sight.

“My Lord Duke Peletta! Are you alright?” shouted the coachman, opening the small door connecting to the carriage’s interior, his voice loud with concern and alarm. He suggested leaping out at a clearer

spot, given the uncontrolled speed of the horses. Kishiar, unsurprised, nodded in agreement.

“That seems wise,” he concurred.

“I’m sorry! I’ll try to stop the horses…” the coachman began.

“No need. I’ll get down first and deal with the enemies. That will divert their attention, and you can continue driving,” Kishiar advised calmly.

“What?” The coachman, dodging arrows, was astonished, not having noticed that the arrows had been missing their target all along, thanks to Kishiar’s push-and-pull abilities.

“It’s too dangerous to abruptly stop the carriage, for both you and the horses. Why risk lives needlessly here?” Kishiar reasoned, still smiling.

“But…!” the coachman protested, still baffled.

“Just a bit further is the Cavalry branch. Break through at the first chance and call for reinforcements. A few might follow, but if you trust my words and don’t delay, it’s doable.”

This suggestion of seeking support was unexpected to the coachman, who had thought Kishiar intended to flee alone. Yet Kishiar offered no further explanation.

The carriage door suddenly swung open with a loud noise, without being touched. Despite the perilously swaying door, Kishiar rose, stepping out as if about to descend comfortably.

“Not now… My Lord!” The coachman, thinking it wasn’t the right time to open the door, cried out in alarm. To his astonishment, Kishiar landed lightly on the ground without any apparent impact.

Amid the coachman's astounded gaze, the barrage of arrows ceased, and the faces of the mysterious assailants began to emerge.

Thanks to Kishiar's foresight, the carriage, unnoticed by anyone, found its path surprisingly clear ahead. The coachman, realizing that everything had unfolded as Kishiar predicted, clenched his teeth and steered the horses towards the southern branch, speeding away as he caught a last glimpse of the assailants converging on the Duke of Peletta.

Watching the carriage disappear, Kishiar surveyed his surroundings with an inscrutable smile. There were about fifteen assailants in total. They seemed too conspicuous for assassins, dressed not in battle gear but in ordinary civilian clothes, some cloaked in robes that didn't stand out much.

Most notably, they appeared to be Awakeners.

Their eyes shone with excitement and tremor, weapons at the ready. Yet, within those eyes, there was an unmistakable trace of fear and uncertainty, unfamiliar with the situation at hand. Surrounded by them, Kishiar, unfazed and smiling, kindly initiated the conversation.

"So many guests to greet in such a place. Shouldn't you at least tell me where you're from?"

"We are…," someone began to reply.

"Don't answer him. Remember, the Duke of Peletta is an Awakener too! Get back!"

A woman interrupted, likely the group's leader.

Sera

Kishiar pretended not to hear her name, muttered by the hesitant assailants, but he made sure to remember it.

Paying attention elsewhere while keeping his ears open for crucial information was one of his specialties.

They knew who Kishiar was. Their pursuit and attack indicated that this wasn't a spontaneous encounter but a premeditated ambush, possibly connected to the untimely death of the Second Prince of Herne and the fact that Kishiar might be absent from the southern branch.

It seemed impossible unless they were behind the Second Prince of Herne's death.

Sera, the apparent leader, didn't strike Kishiar as exceptionally skilled or powerful, leading him to wonder who truly orchestrated this group. With a seemingly vacant gaze, Kishiar's mind worked rapidly, drawing near-accurate conclusions that others might miss.

Before Kishiar could identify the 'real' leader within the group, the assailants, deciding they couldn't delay further, charged again.

"You three, follow the carriage! The rest, proceed as planned! Block the path so he can't escape!"

Three were chasing the carriage. Kishiar hoped the coachman remembered his instructions and didn't look back.

As Sera gave the order, the attack commenced in a somewhat coordinated manner. Lacking the finesse of professional assassins or the refined strength of Cavalry members, the Awakener assailants made up for their inexperience with their extraordinary abilities.

They showed signs of training, albeit unorthodox.

Kishiar, using his mastery of push and pull forces, moved swiftly, dodging the attacks. He could move faster but deliberately moderated his speed to narrowly evade, provoking his adversaries further.

“D*mn it! How does he dodge like that?”*

“My arrows can’t reach him!”

“Fools. That must be the Duke’s power. Don’t get entangled! Keep attacking!”

Even as she spoke, Sera’s face contorted in response to the unexpected turn of events.

The Duke of Peletta, arrogantly alone and without even drawing the sword at his waist, was an impressive figure. Despite rumors of his frailty, his tall stature and solid build were initially startling. They thought him no serious threat, assuming his ability to merely evade attacks was the extent of his power. Yet, frustratingly, they couldn’t land a single blow on him.

The plan was straightforward: swiftly strike a blow at the Duke of Peletta and the core of the Cavalry, then retreat. Lingering in combat within the city, even in its outskirts, was not advantageous for them.

*“Sh*t.”

Beside Sera, a comrade fiercely launched a sharpened twig like a dagger at the Duke of Peletta. Kishiar, however, evaded this and other simultaneous attacks with eel-like agility, his fluttering clothes getting nicked and torn by the sharp assaults, almost gracelessly.

How could he so effortlessly dodge the attacks of over ten assailants? And as time passed, it seemed increasingly as if Kishiar was getting better at predicting their individual moves, an impossible thought that, in fact, was true. Kishiar was deliberately observing

their attacks to gather information, a concept beyond Sera's understanding.

As the notion that they might be overpowered by the Duke of Peletta dawned on Sera, she, gripped by anxiety, unwittingly glanced towards the collaborator who had suggested this assault and revealed the opportunity. One of the Southern merchants, cloaked in a robe and aiding in the attack, felt her gaze and turned his head, signaling not yet time to retreat.

They had said once the Duke of Peletta was taken down, they would create an escape route for the Southern merchants. With the plan not going as expected, Sera wondered if it was time to deploy that method.

However, the merchant, catching Sera's look, firmly shook his head, indicating it wasn't yet time to fall back.

Just as Sera was about to bite her lip and order a change in attack pattern, she locked eyes with Kishiar's piercing red gaze, which had been watching her all along. Feeling as if her thoughts and emotions were laid bare, she flinched, and in that moment, Kishiar spoke up cheerfully.

"Found you. You're the real 'head' leading these people."

The identified Southern merchant stiffened momentarily. Before he could react, Kishiar, who had been evading until then, charged at him with incredible speed, a stark contrast to his previous movements. The merchant struggled, flailing his weapon as Kishiar grasped his throat.

Another Southern merchant shouted something in an unfamiliar language and began rummaging for something in his clothing.

Before it could be recognized, whatever it was, an unseen force exploded from Kishiar, pushing everyone back with immense

pressure.

Sera and her comrades, caught off guard, screamed and tumbled backward.

“Ah!”

“What is this…!”

They spat out the dust, trying to steady their dizzied heads.

Through the settling dust, they saw the Duke of Peletta, now wielding a silvery sword.

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Chapter 723

Kishiar, who had so far faced his enemies with ease without wielding a weapon, drew his sword in response to an instinctual warning. It was a rare decision for him, as he typically acted based on thorough rational judgment rather than instinct.

However, this decision was spot-on. The moment he grasped the divine sword, an unusual surge of magic power burst forth from the cloaked figures around him.

Kishiar, a mage with superior magic power sensitivity, could clearly sense the flow and danger of this power. It wasn't the common kind of magic one usually encountered. In an age where magic was fading, this was a rare, pure force capable of wondrous feats.

Facing this formless, threatening force was perilous, but fortunately, Kishiar was not only an Awakener and a swordmaster but also a mage and sometimes even a priest.

Feeling the surge of magic power, he pushed away a cloaked man he had been holding with a 'push force', while simultaneously drawing the sword, wrapped in plain cloth, from its sheath with a 'pull force'. The sword, unassuming in appearance, was the divine sword Orr.

The rumor that Duke Peleta had become the new owner of the divine sword Orr was disbelieved for two reasons: the strong bias against the notion of such a divine sword being carried so casually, and a magic artifact attached to the sheath before the journey that diminished recognition. This artifact, often used by nobles to protect treasures from thieves, blurred the perception of its appearance.

The sword itself, stripped of later-added jewels and decorations, was exceedingly sharp and silvery, but otherwise unremarkable.

Yet, a divine sword is a divine sword.

Unbeknownst to many, it was as adept at cutting ‘power’ as it was at slicing physical forms.

At the moment when magic power swirled violently around, Kishiar swung his arm wielding Orr. If Yuder had seen it, he would have recognized the immense power in the smooth, unexaggerated movement. But he was not there.

Time seemed to slow down as the silvery blade cut through something invisible, a sensation both eerie and fascinating. Kishiar watched the sword’s trajectory without blinking.

Only after slicing through the last of the escaping magic power did Kishiar slowly close and open his eyes.

Then, as if the world had been waiting, it resumed its pace, and the once powerful magic, now completely devoid of its strength, dispersed in all directions.

All this happened in the blink of an eye.

No one fully grasped what had transpired, only perceiving an invisible force exploding and collapsing around them.

Those who fell did not realize that if Kishiar had not quickly drawn his sword, they would have been swept away by the dangerous magic, meeting a far worse fate.

Even among swordmasters, Kishiar had accomplished a feat few would dare to attempt, yet he remained composed. He merely observed the result of using the divine sword’s power for the first time, a power he had only known in theory until now.

“Oh, it seems a bit of blood has stained my robe.”

In the moment he had pushed away the person he had caught to slice through the flow of magic power, their blood had seemingly smeared on his garment. Kishiar turned his gaze towards them, seemingly flustered that things had not gone as intended.

Peeking through the overturned robes, the distinctive red skin of the Southern people was visible. It seemed that those clad in robes, hiding their skin, were all Southerners.

Suspicious Southerners wielding strange magic in such a place, and an Awakener at that. There was only one identity that came to mind.

A smile returned to Kishiar’s face, which had vanished while he wielded the sword.

“To think they would come to me before I even started searching. Sending my precious assistant and adjutant was in vain. But this strange flow of magic power… It doesn’t seem to be a mage’s doing. What trickery is this?”

Seeing Kishiar like this, Sera and her fellow companions were seized by an indescribable fear. Despite everything that had happened, they still could not comprehend the extent of Duke Peletta’s abilities or what he had just done with the sword.

Ignorance of one’s opponent quickly turned into fear.

Sera decided they couldn’t waste any more time here aiding the Southern merchants and hurriedly stood up.

This place was near the southern branch of the Cavalry anyway. Although it was regrettable that their mission was incomplete, escaping safely was the priority.

“Damn it everyone, get up quickly!”

“Ugh Ughhh”

“Hmm. Leaving already?”

Duke Peletta asked, his eyes wide with genuine curiosity, his sword-laden hand hanging loosely. His demeanor appeared chilling to onlookers.

Come to think of it, he had been like this from the start. Ever since he jumped out of the ambushed carriage, he had never shown a moment of panic or lack of composure.

How could a sane human act in such a manner? It made one wonder if the rumors about him being an unpredictable madman might actually be true, despite the falsehoods in many of his tales.

Near Sera, gasping for breath, a Southern merchant spoke in a low voice.

“It seems Duke Peletta being alone here was no coincidence. It looks like something must have happened at the place where we originally planned to evade to.”

“What do you mean?”

“Right now, tremendous power is stirring in two places: where our helpers are staying and here. We underestimated the power Duke Peletta possesses. It was our misjudgment.”

Sera remembered that one of the Southern merchants had the ability to sensitively detect the flow of power. Thanks to this ability, they had quickly detected the movement of monsters approaching their southern base, providing significant assistance.

Now, it seemed this ability was not limited to sensing monsters but also the power of humans.

“So, does that mean we have no way to escape from here now? You said you could find us a way out!”

“I never said that. There is still a way out. But you’ll have to buy us more time”

As the Southern merchant was about to continue, he suddenly turned his head, sensing something. Then, from a distance, shouts were heard.

“Duke!”

“The Duke is over there!”

…

In silence, the urgently approaching figures were not from the Cavalry but were clad in Imperial Army uniforms, unmistakably reinforcements for Kishiar. Why the Cavalry was absent remained a mystery, but it seemed that the coachman had managed to reach them properly. Kishiar, with a smile on his face, waved his hand and spoke.

“Are you planning to continue fighting? I’d prefer if you surrendered at this point.”

Sera bit her lip. Reinforcements had indeed arrived. It felt like everything had completely fallen apart.

However, the Southern merchants appeared relatively calm, and it was clear they still had a plan up their sleeve. Sera decided to trust them and not give up just yet. If there was any way to escape, she was willing to help.

“Everyone, snap out of it! We need to attack first to survive!”

Her shout awakened her companions, who one by one stood up and began to confront Duke Peletta and the approaching reinforcements.

But why was this happening? Though they intended only to engage Duke Peletta and then retreat, upon regaining their senses, they found themselves nearly at the southern branch of the Cavalry, caught between the reinforcements and Duke Peletta.

“What is this…!”

Incredibly, at that location were the members from the Star of Nagran’s central stronghold, who were supposed to fake support for the Cavalry today, and they were already in a standoff with the Cavalry. The detestable members of the Cavalry cheered upon seeing their leader safely returned.

“Commander!”

“I’ve heard the rough story from the Imperial Army. You must have had a tough time with the sudden situation.”

While the Cavalry rejoiced, the Star of Nagran’s forces were filled with silent shock.

The members from the central Stronghold, who had come down to the south to prepare for infiltrating the Cavalry and had received help from Sera, recognized her and the southern stronghold’s Awakeners, widening their eyes in disbelief.

Exchanges of bewildered looks communicated their mutual inability to understand why each was in this situation, but the chaotic standoff left no room for conversation.

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Chapter 724

What in the world was this situation?

The prey was supposed to be the Cavalry, but it seemed they were the ones being hunted.

Could it be that the Cavalry knew their plan from the very beginning?

The Awakeners of the Star of Nagran vehemently denied such a possibility in their minds, but their hearts told a different story. They struggled to break free from the chaos, but no path of escape from the Cavalry's encirclement was in sight.

Yet, even in such dire straits, the southern merchants remained quietly on the sidelines, offering no significant assistance. Their eyes, cold and detached, watched the Star of Nagran Awakeners fall and suffer, unlike their previous friendly demeanor.

One of them had narrowly escaped the clutches of Duke Peletta, yet instead of harboring vengeance, they seemed preoccupied with something else.

It was unclear what these seemingly observant and waiting merchants desired, but Sera fervently hoped it was the promised opportunity for escape, thus she protected them with all her might, as promised.

Even Duke Peletta, who seemed to have easily gained the upper hand after reuniting with his men and issuing seamless orders, was keenly observing them.

"Commander, we've almost finished arranging our members to protect the buildings around the branch and evacuating the civilians.

Shall we now start suppressing them with our powers?”

“We should, but… I hesitate.”

“Pardon?”

“Didn’t you notice? There are those among them who have cleverly inserted themselves without using much power.”

Presumably, these were the southern merchants they had missed in the west.

What exactly was that strange magic attack they attempted earlier? Was it a one-time act? Kishiar was disturbed by their cunningly passive behavior, as he hadn’t yet fully understood the cause of the attack.

To Kishiar, they seemed like people waiting for something.

What were they waiting for? The right moment to unleash a second attack on the Cavalry, inflicting damage? An opportunity to escape? Or something else entirely?

It was hard to guarantee that a similar attack, if attempted again, would be thwarted at the right moment. The outcome of that magic power flow, once properly formed, was even beyond Kishiar’s speculation.

If a more skilled and experienced mage had been present, perhaps more could have been gleaned from the attempt and failure of the attack. Unfortunately, there was no such person there.

If they were indeed waiting to launch that strange magic attack again, Kishiar decided he couldn’t recklessly send in the Cavalry. Those not versed in magic wouldn’t be able to perceive and react to the flow of magic power as quickly and accurately as Kishiar, risking severe damage.

Therefore, he temporarily postponed his plan to start suppressing them right after finishing the evacuation and preparations around the branch. Instead, he persistently observed the southern merchants, lost in thought.

What could be a safe response that would minimize damage and quickly reveal their intentions? What were they waiting for, and what did they desire to achieve by doing this?

Kishiar La Orrs mind raced over a metaphorical board, pieces and markers moving across it, drawing dozens of potential tactics and outcomes.

At the end of his contemplation, Kishiar arrived at a conclusion he deemed the best.

“It was difficult to discern their intentions, but one thing was clear. If they were planning to confront the Cavalry, they inevitably had to be concerned about the whereabouts of another person besides me.”

Kishiar hinted at this with a knowing wink towards Yuder, clearly believing Yuder would understand who he was referring to.

Of course, he meant Yuder Aile, Kishiar’s assistant.

When the enemies ambushed, Kishiar had been alone. The absence of Nathan Zuckerman and Yuder Aile, who should have been by his side, was not a concern when Kishiar was solitary. However, the situation changed once he regrouped with his subordinates.

Outnumbered, and with Yuder Aile, known as one of the Cavalry’s strongest forces, yet to appear, the enemy, if rational, would have realized that Duke Peletta being alone was not mere coincidence and would be on high alert for Yuder’s return.

Nathan Zuckerman was also a knight of considerable skill, but his true capabilities remained unpublicized.

With this in mind, Kishiar saw clearly what he needed to do.

If the enemy's objective was unknown, the best course was to present them with an opportunity albeit one that seemed so but was actually a trap.

"It seemed best to feign carelessness. So, that's what I did."

"That's…."

Yuder, who had been listening quietly, suddenly furrowed his brow and began to speak, then stopped himself.

'To think, he didn't wield his weapon even when facing over ten foes, yet drew his divine sword feeling instinctive danger He deliberately feigned carelessness before the enemy?'

It was an understanding yet perilously risky choice, uncharacteristic of the usual Kishiar. But precisely because of that, the reason behind such a choice felt all the more apparent.

If Kishiar, who usually sought to minimize harm to his allies, went to such lengths to discern the southern merchants' intentions, it meant he judged the situation as extremely dangerous had their attack succeeded.

Known for prioritizing safety, Kishiar was also someone who wouldn't hesitate to shed his own blood if deemed necessary, a realization Yuder had already come to in a previous life.

The image of Kishiar, who had once stood bare against the colossal Pethuamet, throwing himself into destruction, momentarily flashed in Yuder's mind, chilling his hands. But he bit his lip, casting away the memory.

‘No. Seeing that he’s unharmed now, his feigned carelessness must not have been too perilous. Let’s continue listening.’

Yet, his twitching eyebrows and the cold expression couldn’t completely hide Yuder’s emotions.

“If it was an act of carelessness, how did you go about it?”

“Well, isn’t it obvious? I loudly complained of exhaustion from using too much power in my frail body, told them to leave the rest to my assistant and adjutant sent on errands, and pretended to go inside for a drink. It’s natural to be thirsty after a fight.”

“Is that all?”

“That’s all.”

Kishiar smiled faintly. Yuder blinked and looked at the surrounding members. Their sparkling eyes and nodding heads confirmed that Kishiar’s words were true.

‘Really?’

Yuder hesitated momentarily before asking.

“Did they believe you?”

“They did.”

It was uncertain how convincing Kishiar’s acting had been, but apparently, the enemies had truly believed his ruse. With Yuder Aile, the most powerful hero of the West, confirmed to be away and Kishiar, the Cavalry Commander with unknown abilities, having retreated inside the branch, the enemies finally revealed their true colors.

“Not long after I feigned carelessness and went inside, I began to sense the signs of that magic attack again. However, it was heading

in a slightly different direction than I had anticipated.”

Kishiar, prepared to emerge at any moment using his Awakener abilities, leaped out with his divine sword the instant he sensed the signs.

But what caught his eye was neither his members trying to fend off the attack nor the appearance of the enemies. They were all staring upwards, faces etched with shock, having discovered something.

Kishiar too halted in his tracks, realizing that the massive flow of power he had sensed as the sign of an attack was now condensing above their heads.

Lifting his gaze, he saw a dark crack tearing through the sky like paper, its ominous and eerie presence looming over them.

“…That crack was it?” asked Yuder.

Kishiar nodded in confirmation.

“Yes.”

The sudden appearance of the bizarre crack left everyone bewildered. A crack that tore through space signified the imminent emergence of monsters.

‘Suddenly, here, in this place?!’

‘What is this? How can a crack occur in a city?’

Cracks that spawned monsters did not follow any predictable patterns in terms of timing or location. However, there were certainly areas where they appeared more frequently and others where they were rarer. As a result, people chose to live away from places where cracks commonly appeared. Cities, especially, were areas where

cracks appeared less frequently, and the empire's capital was famous for not having experienced a single crack in a thousand years, thanks to the magic blessed by the Archmage Luma.

But now, a crack had suddenly appeared right above the Cavalry branch in the middle of such a city.

While the members of the Cavalry and the Star of Nagran were in a flurry, anticipating the appearance of monsters, Kishiar was the first to regain his composure.

'No. No, this isn't right. This crack is different from the ordinary ones that spawn monsters.'

Ordinary cracks would immediately spew out monsters and then disappear, but this one merely hovered in place, showing no signs of releasing anything even after several minutes.

Kishiar had seen such a peculiar crack before.

It was in the Great Sarain Forest in the West.

A strange crack that simply existed and then vanished within the forest that only grew denser no matter how much it was cut down. And the sight of Yuder Aile, who alone did not panic but stared at it gravely.

Yuder's exhausted voice speaking of a 'disaster' echoed in Kishiar's mind.

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Chapter 725

A strange crack that simply existed and then vanished within the forest that only grew denser no matter how much it was cut down. And the sight of Yuder Aile, who alone did not panic but stared at it gravely.

Yuder's exhausted voice speaking of a 'disaster' echoed in Kishiar's mind.

"You must have seen the strange cracks that appeared in the west, when the monsters began acting oddly. Do you remember?"

"I have seen similar things before"

Yuder asserted that this was merely the beginning. He described it as a quiet sparkle, a signal flare before countless disasters and hardships, like the calm before a storm.

Kishiar vividly remembered the expression on Yuder's face as he told this tale.

Always known for his impassiveness, Yuder, upon closer inspection, actually had a surprisingly wide range of emotions. Although he appeared cold, within him burned a flame far more intense than others.

But his expression at that moment…

It was utterly devoid of anything.

All that made him human seemed to have been stripped away, leaving behind only dusty and hollow eyes, faintly reflecting ancient dust and a chilling coldness. The Yuder that Kishiar thought he knew,

or believed he knew, had vanished, replaced by someone worn down by a terrible solitude, echoing a hollow voice.

Only those who had faced death could understand the weight of that emptiness. Kishiar felt it not with his mind, but with something deeper.

Even at his brightest, burning fiercely and brilliantly, the deepest part of him harbored a concealed void, akin to the blackened ash left where everything had burned away.

Even when revealing his goal to ‘once again avert the disaster facing the world’, Yuder’s eyes held a resignation, as if he naturally expected Kishiar not to believe him.

His expression, accustomed to self-doubt, spoke the truth without any trace of grievance or desire to persuade, more harrowing in a way than his physically battered and prostrate form.

Somewhere deep within Kishiar, a long groan of pain echoed

“Commander?”

In the midst of discussing something crucial, Yuder stopped and cautiously addressed Kishiar, who was silently staring at him, concern evident in his now dark and laughter-less eyes.

What happened back then? Was there something serious?

As if trying to discern some hidden trace of an untold story, Kishiar’s intense yet worried gaze met Yuder’s, eliciting a soft sigh.

“Sorry. It just struck me how miraculous it was for the assistant to arrive here so timely.”

“Excuse me? What do you mean by that”

The unexpected and somewhat awkward remark caused a frown to form on Yuder's brow, while the man chuckled softly, continuing the conversation.

"As soon as the crack appeared, everyone panicked, thinking monsters were about to emerge. They tried to flee, but fortunately, we remembered the similar cracks we'd seen in the west and managed to avoid being swept up in the chaos."

Kishiar, recalling the cracks he had seen in the Great Sarain Forest and Yuder's words, immediately commanded the bewildered crowd, "Monsters won't appear; keep your focus on the enemy." Without his directive, they would have missed the southern merchants, disguised in robes, attempting to slip away.

Upon hearing Kishiar's affirmation, it wasn't just the Cavalry or the Imperial Army that regained their composure, but also the members of the Star of Nagran.

"Are you telling me you were about to leave us behind just now?! Is that what you meant by clearing the way? What in the world is that strange crack?"

"No, that's not it. It's hard to explain here, but please trust us"

"What's going on, Sera? Are you here under his command? As far as I know, that shouldn't be the case. Why have you come this far? Weren't you from the South supposed to return today? And who are those suspicious people?"

Sera, shocked by the Southern merchants' attempt to escape, raised her voice, forgetting the standoff. The merchants, not intending any harm, tried to calm her, but now a member of the Central stronghold Awakeners, suspicious of Sera, intervened.

The seed of distrust, once sown, spread like wildfire.

It was then that a chill began to circulate among the Awakeners of the Star of Nagran. The Central stronghold gathered with their own, the Southern stronghold with theirs, and the merchants huddled together, exchanging glances and words.

From a distance, Kishiar, with the keen sense of a swordmaster, easily grasped the conversations without moving a finger.

The Central stronghold Awakeners, losing trust in the Southern stronghold for not following the Sage's orders and engaging in dubious activities with the strangers.

The Southern stronghold Awakeners, suspecting but unable to fully confront the Southern merchants they had moved with, unsure how to extract themselves from this situation.

And the silent Southern merchants.

With each group's motives and benefits differing, mutual distrust prevented the battle from progressing, leading to a stalemate.

A situation simmering with tension, yet on the verge of exploding.

Yuder appeared from the sky at that very moment.

"That's how it happened."

Having learned the whole story, Yuder sighed deeply.

Though many events had unfolded where he had been, the situation with Kishiar was even more intense. In the short time Yuder was away, returning alone by carriage to the Cavalry branch, Kishiar had faced an ambush and even used his divine sword to fend off an unknown attack, tensing his muscles to the point of stiffness.

However, it was fortunate that he had managed to turn the situation to their advantage without injury.

“It’s to be expected, but”

Kishiar, immensely powerful but with little experience using his abilities, still had to be cautious about his health and the issue of containment. Knowing he was a brilliant strategist and swordmaster who could slice through walls with a twig, a battle against multiple opponents was still perilously risky. Moreover, he had used more strength than usual since coming South, adding to his fatigue.

Although his condition had improved with Yuder’s assistance, exerting himself again today would have undoubtedly drained him significantly, even if he appeared fine on the surface.

Yet, looking at Kishiar’s brazen smile, one wouldn’t guess he had just faced over a dozen opponents alone. His usual self, a true Kishiar La Orr, was indeed a relief to see.

“Regardless of there being no major incident, those who attacked will pay their dues.”

Yuder’s icy gaze swept over the Awakeners of the Southern stronghold and the robed Southern merchants.

He clenched and unclenched his fist, gauging the strength that remained within him. Although not in a completely relaxed state due to the excessive energy expended while dealing with Aton, he was confident enough to take down those lurking adversaries.

The crack still floated in the sky, existing without any noticeable change. In his memory, such cracks in the Great Sarain Forest had been followed by a surge of monsters, but this had never been the case in the South.

In my previous life in the South, such silent cracks appeared in various places more than ten times before a major earthquake occurred. There were no instances of monsters appearing then. If this is the beginning of something similar, the likelihood is high that it

will repeat. But in the Great Sarain Forest, the appearance of these cracks led to an increase in monsters, so certainty is elusive.

The earthquake in his previous life's South had occurred several years later. It had been difficult to gather information, as it was only after everything had passed that people reported witnessing such cracks.

But could it be that even back then, these cracks had formed in this manner?

Could cracks be created by human power?

The words of Aton floated in his mind, continuously breeding questions.

The one thing that's clear is that to find answers, we must capture those Southern merchants.

Already half-intent on punishing them for the attack on Kishiar, the added need to extract information seemed to invigorate him with newfound strength.

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Chapter 726

Yuder turned his head to gaze upon Kishiar.

“Given the uncertainty of the problems this crack may cause, wouldn’t it be best to deal with them as quickly as possible? I shall go and see to it.”

“Will you go in person?”

Kishiar asked, tilting his head. Yuder, not quite grasping the intent behind his question, remained silent for a moment before responding.

“Yes. Naturally, I must go myself.”

“We’re not so hard-pressed that I need to send someone who’s just returned from battle and is in disarray out again. Why not rest for a while, observe the situation, and leave the suppression to your comrades?”

“…”

Yuder’s eyebrow twitched slightly.

‘…Is this his way of punishing me for failing to heed his warning to avoid injury?’

The situation was not disadvantageous for them, as Kishiar had pointed out. However, as long as those who had caused the crack remained standing, Yuder had no intention of standing by idly.

Though not in perfect condition, he didn’t necessarily need rest. To sit and merely watch was unthinkable, especially given the situation reminiscent of a disaster from a previous life.

“I cannot predict what those Southern merchants might do next. They dared to target you, Commander, and seem to be linked to that crack above. Those two reasons alone make it imperative for me not to back down. If there are no other reasons, I implore you to reconsider.”

Yuder emphasized the phrase “other reasons.” It was a subtle protest against receiving such a punishment, especially having heard about the terrible events in the previous game and now facing this strange crack.

Yet, the response he received was unexpected.

“Is that why you’re worried?”

“Excuse me?”

It was a voice so low and quiet, only Yuder could hear.

Kishiar’s unsmiling eyes quietly watched Yuder’s face, as if trying to see through something hidden.

Caught off guard, Yuder opened his mouth but then hesitated. After a moment, Kishiar let out a small sigh, his face relaxing into a reluctant smile. Soon, it shifted back to his usual, carefree, and shameless expression.

“It was a joke. Of course, having my capable and beautiful assistant take charge is the best and highest course of action. I suggested a rest out of concern, but if that is your wish… Are you sure you’re okay?”

One of the successful candidates looked incredulous, wondering if this was indeed something Duke Peletta had just said to his assistant. The others around, including other successful candidates and imperial soldiers, shared the same expression.

However, the Cavalry members took it all in stride, accustomed to Kishiar's manner of speaking.

Yuder, momentarily caught up in the smile he had just seen, barely registered Kishiar's added nonsensical description.

'What was that?'

He took a deep breath, trying to calm his irregular heartbeat, and nodded firmly.

"I'm fine… Please entrust it to me."

It was natural for him to worry, as Yuder would have felt the same had Kishiar tried to intervene. It wasn't strange that he momentarily showed his concern.

Yuder bowed his head before Kishiar, placing a hand over his chest in the Cavalry's salute. Kishiar, returning to his usual brazen and relaxed demeanor, looked towards the distant enemies and spoke.

"Those called upon now shall follow Yuder Aile to the forefront."

"Yes!"

The waiting Cavalry members responded vigorously. The names Kishiar recited belonged to members possessing power with natural attributes, totaling five.

"Everyone is well aware of Yuder's abilities, I presume."

"Yes. We are aware!"

"From now on, you will be responsible for dealing with the key figures in this incident, aligning thoroughly with Yuder's movements. As it's a practice we often do in the Cavalry, I trust you will perform well in real combat."

Realizing what was expected of them, the members grinned and nodded affirmatively.

“Yes!”

“The rest, as mentioned earlier, will form a formation and start suppressing. Do not miss signals from colleagues already dispatched in the surrounding buildings. Always be vigilant and move accordingly. Remember, precise control and speed of abilities are paramount to minimize collateral damage.”

“Understood!”

As Kishiar raised his hand, the Cavalry members moved in unison. Only the imperial army and successful candidates remained by Kishiar’s side. However, no one was worried about the Commander left behind. The members’ faces brimmed with confidence, a testament to their belief in their skills and the Commander.

Yuder, without looking back at his following comrades, ran, stepping on the wind. Using the wind’s power allowed for high jumps, but with lesser power, he could sprint at tremendous speeds without touching the ground.

Direction control was challenging, and efficiency dropped with prolonged use, but in situations like now, where quick handling was crucial, this method was most appropriate.

“Ah…!”

A Star of Nagran member, thinking he had prepared quickly for the Cavalry’s movement, was startled to find Yuder had reached him in the blink of an eye. He hurriedly swung his sword, but Yuder was no longer there. With a weightless grace, Yuder leaped high and struck the sword-wielding person’s head with his scabbard.

“Ugh!”

‘The target isn’t who I aimed for, but at least one is down.’

Yuder, without looking back at the one who had fallen unconscious, focused only on what lay ahead. The fallen would be collected by the following members of the Cavalry.

Jumping high again while sprinting on the wind, Yuder quickly discerned the positions of both enemies and allies.

Kishiar had strategically positioned members around the southern branch and in surrounding buildings. They replaced civilians for building protection and, from elevated or concealed positions, supported their allies with their abilities.

Members creating barriers in every corner to prevent escape, casting blinding lights to signal enemy directions, and spreading strengthening winds, all contributed to the allies facing the enemy directly, enabling them to exert their powers far more comfortably than usual.

The Cavalry’s form, a fluid encirclement of the enemy, was a product of grueling collective training. Seeing this perfect synergy in action filled Yuder, who had taught them, with immense satisfaction.

In the midst of the tangled fray, Yuder precisely counted and located the robed figures. He longed to knock down the fools from the southern stronghold, but since they were wearing casual clothes, it was very difficult to distinguish them from those from the central stronghold.

There are four of them, all scattered. Did they think its enough if even one escapes?

What was the use? Such tricks were meaningless before Yuder.

While it was common to pursue and confront each adversary individually in such situations, Yuder Aile could, if he could see them all, choose to strike them down simultaneously.

Yuder, harnessing the wind beneath his feet, explosively propelled himself upward. Just before descending, he briefly slowed, reaching his hand toward the distant ground below. His golden eye shimmered brighter as the earth beneath the four southern merchants suddenly caved in.

“!”

They reacted quickly, as if expecting such a sudden turn, but Yuder was not alone. The Cavalry members following him each used their abilities to subdue the enemies, one by one.

The water manipulator flooded the ground, making it swampy to prevent escape, while the fire manipulator surrounded the area Yuder had affected with a ring of fire. Though none could manipulate earth, the air manipulator adjusted the airflow in the hole, making breathing impossible, achieving their goal with ease.

Meanwhile, Yuder, leisurely landing, easily shattered the blind attacks coming his way with a sword in its sheath, a gift from Kishiar, moving forward. The sturdy sheath, a weapon in itself, didn’t necessitate drawing the sword.

Barehanded, with only his robust sword sheath, Yuder felt no need to exert more power. His combat sense, particularly adept in one-against-many battles, shone as always.

His relentless manner invigorated his allies and stunned his enemies.

“Madness… How can he be…!”

“Is he even human?”

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Chapter 727

“Madness… How can he be…!”

“Is he even human?”

‘If not human, then what?’

Yuder, deemed by others as a monstrous non-human, maintained an indifferent expression and pressed forward silently despite the trembling words of disdain. Such remarks had become so commonplace to him that they now felt like a validation of his efficacy.

‘But indeed, those who have undergone proper training are far more challenging than the soft, worthless fighters of the underground illegal fighting rings.’

The challenge was greater when facing fellow Awakeners, as opposed to non-Awakeners. The greatest difficulty lay in predicting the abilities and fighting style of an Awakener until faced in person.

The Awakeners from the Star of Nagran, particularly those with unique abilities, were notoriously unpredictable and lacked any discernible pattern in their fighting styles, making them even more formidable.

However, the difficulty in combating diverse abilities mainly troubled those inexperienced with Awakener.

Yuder could quickly deduce the nature of an opponent’s abilities at the slightest hint of their use.

‘This one must be of the natural attribute. If it’s fire, just quench it with water.’

Before the Awakener could even unleash fire, he was drenched and sent flying with a scream by a surge of water.

‘Why does this one continually rely on his ability to instantaneously enhance his physique without efficiently distributing it? Even a served meal wouldn’t be this easy.’

The physically-enhanced Awakener, who tried to attack Yuder from the side, was effortlessly struck in a weakened vital spot by his casually swung scabbard and fell backwards.

Another Awakener, crouching behind and morphing into a winged beast, charged at Yuder. But as soon as Yuder twisted his scabbard between the creature’s wings, the attacker collapsed, unconscious.

“What kind of monster are you…!”

‘He wields sound control. Impressive, but… try screaming while swallowing a dust storm.’

The one causing turmoil with his piercing screams, making his comrades struggle, was promptly overwhelmed by Yuder’s wind-conjured dust, coughing miserably before collapsing from a scabbard blow.

The abilities of the Awakener, though seemingly unique at a glance, ultimately stemmed from the same human origin and shared similar vulnerabilities.

The Awakeners from the Star of Nagran, intent on targeting the renowned Yuder Aile, were astounded by his rapid, mechanical-like precision, which left them incapacitated.

Kishiar La Orr, who induced a ghost-like fear by never allowing an attack with his mysterious power, was different from Yuder Aile, whose power, although clearly visible, was unavoidably terrifying.

Who called them the indulgent and incompetent Duke Peletta and his toy-like Cavalry?

His mere existence posed a threat like a weapon, causing the enemies' morale to wane steadily.

This was no mere fight of a twenty-year-old youth. Those who had underestimated him as an equal Awakener experienced a daunting disparity in skill and an inexplicable maturity, stirring both awe and fear.

Among them, the Awakener from the southern stronghold who had ambushed Kishiar felt an intensified fear. They knew someone with such overwhelming power would not mercifully spare those who dared attack their master. Had they known earlier that a monster like Yuder was with Duke Peletta, they would not have left their stronghold so easily.

Among them, there were those who had believed that Nahan's repeated defeats against the Cavalry were due to collusion. Only now did they realize that it was a miracle Nahan had managed to return each time from facing a monster like Yuder Aile.

'That guy Awakened around the same time as us, but what accounts for this difference?'

The Cavalry had been formed barely a year ago. Even if he had Awakened earlier, he had only gained his powers about two years ago. How could he fight like this?

As fellow Awakeners, they were even more acutely aware of Yuder Aile's absurd strength. Those who possessed similar attributes of power felt it even more intensely.

Those who had been smug about their strong abilities, and those who had underestimated the young Yuder, were all equally shocked, as if their world had been turned upside down.

“This can’t be…”

The sage who had sent them here had not warned them about the strength of the Cavalry.

Having already experienced a group of Awakeners in the Star of Nagran, they thought a second encounter would be no different.

But this was nothing like that. They were like in the belly of a gaping lion.

The demoralized men hesitated and retreated. But instead of an escape, they found the smiling members of the Cavalry guarding the encirclement. Yuder had been so overwhelmingly dominant that it overshadowed the fact that the others were also experienced and adept in handling their powers.

“Hey, looking at Yuder, we seem pretty easy, huh?”

“You dare to infiltrate our branch? I’ll show you exactly where you tried to enter. What? You won’t look? No refusal accepted. Your chance to leave is over!”

As the attackers targeting Yuder began to scatter in fear, he leisurely moved towards the location of the southern merchants he had trapped with his earth abilities. Initially, he had planned to head straight to them upon landing, but he was delayed by the unexpectedly large number of the Star of Nagrans Awakener who, fearlessly, had targeted him first.

If it weren’t for the comrades assigned by Kishiar, even after capturing them, he would have been concerned about their escape, preventing him from fighting so freely. Initially, he had thought Kishiar’s concern excessive, but his decision had proven to be significantly helpful.

This demonstrated Kishiar’s exceptional ability to read the flow of the battlefield.

‘He must have predicted how I would fight and who I would target first. Maybe even more accurately than I could…’

It’s not pleasant to know that others can predict one’s actions. Being predictable means being vulnerable to defeat at any time.

But if the other party was Kishiar, it was different. Far from being displeased, Yuder felt a sense of gratification and slightly lifted his head.

He felt as if he caught Kishiars gaze from a distance. It was probably true.

Even though Kishiars face was hardly visible from such a distance, Yuder could clearly feel those red eyes not missing a single move of his. A warm heat overflowed in his heart.

However, separate from that, the crack that hung over their heads still remained, maintaining its ominous appearance.

‘I’m not sure if it’s just my imagination… but it seems to have grown larger than before.’

“Yuder!”

As Yuder frowned and tried to observe the crack more closely, one of the members holding the southern merchant called out. Yuder resumed his steps and headed towards them.

Yergin Schiller, the Awakener with wind and air attributes, was sweating but did not lessen her grip on the subdued southern merchant. As Yuder approached, she spoke.

“I was wondering when you’d come, what with everyone clinging to you. Whew, finally some relief.”

“The one you caught?”

“I took their weapons and belongings and buried them in a pit. I’ll dig them out now.”

As Yergin used her powers, the face of a semi-conscious person emerged from the pit. Yuder grabbed the person by the scruff and pulled them up. A woman’s face with red skin was revealed as her robe flipped over her head, her short hair framing her vaguely focused eyes, shimmering with an indiscernible emotion.

It was a chilling gaze, but Yuder wouldn’t have come this far if he were afraid of such things. Yergin, standing beside him, was not frightened either, whistling while inspecting the confiscated weapons. Yuder, still holding the woman by the scruff, looked straight into her eyes and asked.

“That crack. It’s your doing, isn’t it?”

“…”

“How could humans have caused such a crack?”

“…”

No matter what he asked, no answer came back. There was no response, as if her tongue had been cut out.

‘Well, I didn’t expect a cordial response anyway.’

But the actual leader of these people, Aton, wasn’t so reticent, having spewed quite a bit of nonsense. Perhaps mentioning what he had said would provoke a reaction. Yuder recalled a particularly noteworthy phrase from Aton’s ramblings.

“Is this the result of your nonsense about ‘repercussions of imbalance’ turning this into the land of the black moon?”

“…”

Indeed. For the first time, the woman blinked and showed a reaction. A hint of emotion flickered in her distinctly southern, dark eyes.

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Chapter 728

Indeed. For the first time, the woman blinked and showed a reaction. A hint of emotion flickered in her distinctly southern, dark eyes.

“Who told you that?” she asked, her accent harsher than that of Aton.

Yuder, realizing he had successfully engaged her in their imperial tongue, smirked slightly. “Your leader, who suffered a beating at my hands before you did,” he replied.

“…Sir Aton?” she questioned in disbelief.

“Exactly.”

“That’s impossible.”

“Why? You also lost to me without laying a hand on me.”

This left the Southern merchant speechless.

Yuder, gripping the merchant’s collar tighter, leaned in, his eyes as dark as the night sky. The woman’s eyes trembled as if uncomfortable under his gaze.

“What does it mean to create a land of the black moon by the repercussions of imbalance? What do your Wolfs Eyes want, and what outcome does this crack bring?” Yuder demanded.

The woman remained silent, lips tightly sealed. Yuder considered interrogating another merchant when Yergin, his companion, suddenly made a curious noise, having discovered something.

“Yuder, sorry to interrupt, but can you look at this? I found something odd among the belongings we took from her.”

Yuder released the merchant, turning to see what Yergin had found - an old cloth pouch with a small, palm-sized box inside. Opening it, Yuder found another pouch filled with white powder, which gave off a musty, rotten smell. Yuder immediately recognized it as the counterfeit drug they had swapped in the West.

Why carry around spoiled drugs? he wondered, pocketing the pouch. As he was about to close the box, Yuder’s eyes flickered in recognition, The shape of the inside of the box looks somewhat familiar.

“The powder’s identity is unclear, but it reeked terribly once the box was opened. Could this be their weapon?” Yergin speculated.

Yuder, pondering whether to disappoint his comrade with the truth that it was merely rotten illegal drugs, ultimately shook his head.

Hold on, he thought, intrigued by the comment that the box emitted no smell when closed. He opened and closed it repeatedly.

This is no ordinary box, Yuder realized, his expression changing. He began shaking the small box next to his ear, prompting Yergin to ask quizzically, “What are you doing? Is this some new training method?”

“No,” Yuder replied, still shaking the box. Though he wondered what she thought of him, discovering the secret of this box was largely thanks to her. Yuder opened the box again and briefly expressed his thanks.

“Thanks to you, I found it.”

“What did you find?”

“The hidden compartment in the box.”

“The hidden… what?”

Yuder, instead of explaining, fiddled with the inside of the open box with his fingers. It seemed plain to the eye, but when touched, a catch was revealed.

It was the key to a new space, secretly hidden beneath the box’s bottom.

Yuder had seen such a secret double-bottomed box before when he was pretending to be Kishiar’s lover in Tainu. He had received a lapis lazuli cigarette case of the exact same structure as a gift while surveilling suspicious individuals under the guise of buying rare goods from the crowded streets.

Despite initially refusing such a box, thinking it unnecessary, Yuder had stored a flower folded from candy paper, given by Kishiar, in its secret compartment, hidden in the depths of his wardrobe. It seemed the only appropriate place to keep it safe and out of sight.

Had he not had the experience of opening and closing the box a few times before, he might not have discovered its secret compartment. Fortunately, despite differences in form and material, the opening mechanism was similar.

Yuder twisted the part he felt with his fingertips forcefully. The bottom opened, revealing the hidden space and its contents. Yergin applauded in admiration.

Wow! That’s amazing. As expected of Baron Aile.

Though Yuder had no significant rapport with Yergin in the previous life, he could clearly sense that she was a highly competent member of the excessively bloated Cavalry. He sent her a frown,

suggesting she keep it down, and carefully picked up the hidden object.

“No, dont you dare!”

The southern merchant, having seen what Yuder was doing from inside the pit, thrashed about, growling. Of course, no one here was really going to stop because of such words.

“How did you know that was hidden there?”

“If a box is sealed well enough to contain a rotting smell, it’s likely more expensive than it appears. It’s odd to store only rotten powder in such a box. Plus, when I shook it, I heard something rattling.”

“Hey, I hadn’t thought of that. I’ll learn from this.”

Yuder, letting her words go in one ear and out the other, examined the object he had picked up closely in midair.

‘A jewel? No, a magic stone?’

It was an opaque black stone. It looked like a raw gemstone, but faintly emitted a weak magic energy, suggesting it might be a magic stone.

Small in size, but definitely worthy of further investigation.

‘I should send this to Kishiar.’

Just as Yuder was about to put it back in the box, a loud shout came from the pit.

“You fools above the desert will never understand what this is!”

“…”

“The more you meddle, the more the balance will be disturbed beyond repair. You’ve lost.”

That was as much as Yuder could understand. The woman, muttering in a mix of southern language, took a deep breath and then shouted in pure southern tongue.

“Inia! Kta Inia!”

After the shout, there was a gruesome sound from inside the woman’s mouth.

“Oh? What…!”

Startled, Yergin dove into the pit, but soon reemerged, her face a mixture of shock and disbelief.

“My God. She’s killed herself! What kind of people are these, to take their lives so easily…”

“Yuder…!”

“Yuder!”

Then, calls for Yuder began simultaneously from all around. They were from the Cavalry members, each guarding a southern merchant.

“Come quickly! This guy’s about to kill himself…!”

“Why, why is this happening? Suddenly acting crazy…!”

Yuder regretted not having gagged them earlier, gathering his strength in haste. He tried to enhance and use the powers of earth and wind, but could not prevent the deaths of the remaining southern merchants.

In an instant, four corpses lay before Yuder. He, pale-faced, searched the bodies for possessions and weapons in place of the other stunned members. Each had the same item as the first woman who died a secretive box, and a similar stone was found beneath the hidden compartment of these boxes.

There were no other items to identify them, and all their weapons were ordinary.

‘What were these people planning to do with these?’

While Yuder was lost in thought, the remaining members nearly subdued all of Star of Nagrans members. They all thought the situation would resolve without any harm to allies or damage to surrounding buildings.

Unaware of the merchants’ deaths, they were concluding the battle amidst their mixed emotions.

“…Yuder!”

Hearing a faint call, Yuder reflexively raised his head while pondering over the corpses.

‘Kishiar?’

Almost immediately after, something fell from the sky, crushing the four corpses completely. It landed so close that it would have hit him had he not lifted his head in time.

The impact shook the ground, startling everyone into screaming. Yuder, rolling backward, instinctively wrapped himself in the power of wind to offset the shock and quickly got up to look ahead.

“What, look at that!”

“A monster…! It’s a monster!”

A ghastly form, slowly rising above the crushed corpses, loomed ominously. Its thin, fragile-looking legs and disproportionately swollen body, topped with oddly sturdy wings, made for a grotesque sight.

It was a monster, as large as a carriage.

As it raised its head and its hollow eye sockets began to move, identical forms started falling from the sky in succession.

Thud, thud. Thud

In this unimaginable, nightmarish scene, even the seasoned Cavalry members were flustered, staring blankly at the sky.

“Uh… uh…”

“…”

Yuder, watching the monsters rain down like a downpour, quickly drew his sword. Though he didn’t understand the situation, his instinct as a seasoned monster fighter who had faced death countless times kicked in.

At the same time, a familiar scent rapidly enveloped him.

Kishiar, having somehow run there in no time, stared at the monsters with unsmiling eyes, sword in hand, and asked,

“…Did anything like this happen in the previous game?”

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Chapter 729

“…Did anything like this happen in the previous game?”

Amidst the roaring and screams from monsters falling and buildings crumbling, that voice alone pierced distinctly into Yuder’s ears.

Caught off guard by the unexpected events, Yuder felt a slight warmth return to his blood, which had gone cold, the moment he became aware of Kishiar’s presence. He took a small but deep breath and shook his head.

“No.”

“Indeed, that would make sense. If you had known, you would have warned us earlier.”

That was true. If Yuder had been certain such an event would occur, he would have rushed out alone, as he did during the Pethuamet crisis in the West, to prevent it. However, Yuder did recall a disaster strikingly similar to the current situation.

A wind began to disturb the air around Yuder. He muttered quickly and softly, words meant only for Kishiar’s ears.

“While I have never seen monsters emerge this way, the crack I witnessed reminded me starkly of the signs of an event I remember.”

“What event?”

“The Southern Earthquake, recorded as the Empire’s first catastrophe in the previous game.”

Originally, the Southern Earthquake was not expected to happen for several more years.

A single quake, dozens of days of aftershocks, and the massive tsunami that engulfed three regions in its aftermath.

The disaster damaged most buildings in the southern cities, killed and injured countless people, and resulted in the loss of innumerable cultural artifacts and ruins.

Usually, before such a disaster occurs, it is possible to predict to some extent signs that something unusual will happen through changes in the surrounding natural environment. However, the Southern Earthquake was unexpected, which worsened its impact.

In hindsight, Yuder thought he should have noticed something unusual from the start. However, an earthquake is a natural disaster, and it is usually not thought that there might be some special or strange cause for a natural disaster to occur suddenly.

At the time, Yuder was busy suppressing the old nobility and concentrating power for Emperor Katchian, dealing with uncooperative and hostile nobles, and aiding in disaster recovery.

Moreover, the Southern branch of the Cavalry was located slightly away from the most affected areas, delaying their response. This led to criticisms of the Cavalry's ineffectiveness, a move instigated by the old nobles in their power struggle with Emperor Katchian. Although the Emperor shielded Yuder, it still took considerable time for Yuder, an expert in natural elements, to take charge in the south.

Politically motivated delays exacerbated the aftermath of the earthquake, yet no one mentioned this fact.

'Anyway, the important thing is that although such cracks were observed back then, monsters never appeared. The timing and

process are different now. But to say they are completely unrelated…’

With the newfound suspicion that the Southern merchants might be behind these strange occurrences, Yuder couldn’t dismiss a possible connection.

Yuder succinctly relayed this information to Kishiar.

At that time, several cracks like this were seen, followed by an earthquake throughout the South. There had been no appearance of monsters, and the timing now is much quicker, but if this crack and the Southern merchants are connected, it seems difficult to dismiss the relation entirely.

“So you think it might have been caused by the same people as before.”

“Yes.”

In his previous life, he had never properly interacted with the people of the Southern countries, so he had no way of knowing how far their influence extended. As Emperor Katchian’s loyal sword, he had spent too long focusing solely on the information given to him, deliberately ignoring anything beyond that.

He had thought it enough just to strengthen the Cavalry and do the tasks assigned to him, but now those times seemed regrettable.

However, Yuder did not consider these unexpected events a failure.

The appearance of the strange crack had accelerated, but it confirmed that this was not a natural occurrence and solidified the possibility of the Southern merchants’ involvement. Monsters might be falling like rain from the sky, but for now, the area affected was only around the Southern branch of the Cavalry. Thankfully, the

citizens had long been evacuated, so no one was harmed, a blessing in disguise.

More importantly, Yuder was no longer alone in sustaining the Cavalry.

Now, under Kishiar, he could fully focus on resolving these monster incidents and the impending disaster-related investigation.

Because Kishiar was here.

Holding onto that thought, Yuder pulled out the black stones he had found amongst the belongings of the dead Southern merchants.

“These are items carried by the deceased Southern merchants. I find it difficult to identify them, so a detailed investigation will be necessary after this is over.”

Kishiar’s gaze briefly shifted to the barely visible remains of the Southern merchants, crushed under the monsters.

“Understood. You did well to collect them amidst this chaos.”

“It’s not something to be praised for. I couldn’t prevent their suicide.”

“Not everyone can handle every situation perfectly as planned. I too had assumed they weren’t the type to give up their lives so easily like assassins, so if we’re to blame, it’s my fault too.”

“That’s not true. You were far away, Commander. Please, consider this my responsibility.”

Yuder’s firm response brought a smile to Kishiar’s face, incongruous with the situation. As Yuder hesitated, Kishiar spoke.

“Their deaths are regrettable, but it’s not the worst scenario. Aton, whom we captured before your arrival, is still alive. You’re pushing

the responsibility onto yourself to prevent the others who helped and me from being implicated in this monster incident, aren't you?"

"…"

"It's not right to bear it alone."

"That's not it…"

Ah, Kishiar La Orr.

Yuder felt his intentions had been read correctly, though he still tried to argue. Yet, his objections were quickly halted by Kishiar's words.

"Hmm… Did I ever say that taking responsibility is one of my favorite things in the world?"

"…"

Kishiar gently brushed his hair with a tender touch.

"You know, the weight of responsibility is very heavy. But it's something that is only assigned to those who are deemed capable of bearing it. And, unfortunately, that's an area where I haven't been greatly relied upon until now."

It sounded like sophistry, yet still.

"With this opportunity, I can test how much I can endure and protect. And the thought that my assistant will witness it makes my heart race. It's not bad at all."

His heart pounded in response to the jesting words that seemed to suggest it was unfair for him to monopolize such a great opportunity.

Could it really be a good opportunity? But looking at that face, it truly seemed so. Strangely enough.

Amidst the deafening pounding in his ears, Kishiar smoothly twirled the hilt of the sword he grasped and straightened it.

“Let’s leave the rest of the discussion for after we finish this, and for now, shall we go together?”

Before the words were even fully uttered, Kishiar raised his sword high and swung it down.

Once again, Yuder witnessed the perfect trajectory of the sword he had seen before. The tip of the sword drew a silvery line through the air.

Instantly, a monster that had approached them, mouth agape, was enveloped in a blue light and split into two.

“—-!”

Yuder saw the neatly cleaved monster above his head smoothly slide apart in both directions and collapse. Bone and flesh, like the smooth surface of a glass, split with clean cuts, an utterly surreal sight.

Thump… Thump.

No terrifying scream, incomprehensible to human ears, was heard. The organs that could have produced such a sound had already been split in two. Yuder turned to look at the giant corpse of the monster, felled by a single sword strike. It twitched as if not yet completely dead, but astonishingly, not a single drop of its spilt fluids reached Yuder.

It was a sword technique bordering on miraculous.

The power of a swordmaster.

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Chapter 730

Cavalry! It is indeed a daunting task to battle monsters, but I need you to focus intently and listen to me. I have assessed the situation and am ready to issue orders.”

Kishiar, having just released his sword radiating a blue aura, called out to everyone. His voice, though not raised excessively, had the power to command attention instantly. This time, too, it effortlessly roused the spirits of the Cavalry members, who were ensnared in confusion and dismay.

“Everyone knows that when monsters appear, cracks accompany them. I don’t suppose anyone is surprised by this obvious fact. Or is there anyone here who is?”

“No, Commander!”

Shouts came from various directions, even as some struggled to fend off monsters, their roars and thudding footsteps resounding in the background.

Yet, Kishiar’s face bore a relaxed smile, devoid of urgency, reassuring those watching him.

“Good. As it stands, there are fifteen monsters hereno, fourteen, I reckon? And soon to be thirteen, judging from over there.”

“Ah… ha ha….”

Even the tense recruits and Imperial soldiers managed a strained laugh at Kishiar’s witty joke.

“Fortunately, the crack has vanished, so no more monsters will appear. And they’re confined within the area we’re surrounding.

They’re too big to escape unnoticed, so we don’t need to count them anymore.”

The implication was clear to all: if they could deal with the monsters here, they could resolve the situation without endangering civilians.

This hopeful message visibly shifted the mood. The faces of the Cavalry members, previously dismayed, now filled with calm determination and resolve, as Kishiar raised his hand.

“So, our only task now is to maintain our current encirclement and deal with these monsters. Are we capable of that?”

“Yes, Commander!”

The number of Cavalry members present was significantly fewer compared to those at the capital’s headquarters, as they were merely the members dispatched to the southern branch. Even though their leader, Kurga, had not yet returned, their faces were resolute.

‘It’s strange that Kurga hasn’t returned yet. He should have been back before us, to inform the other members and investigate the death of the second prince of Herne There is a high possibility that Kurga had encountered trouble on his way back.

It wasn’t surprising, given that the same culprits had targeted Duke Peletta’s carriage. But Kishiar must have anticipated this and taken measures upon realizing Kurga’s absence.

‘I dont know about the Knights of the Herne Duchy, but Kurga is not weak enough to be easily defeated. I have to believe that nothing serious has happened.’

As Kishiar surveyed his troops, he once again raised his sword.

“Alright then, let’s begin the annihilation. Cavalry, switch to lure-and-attack formation! Yuder and I will take the center.”

Lure-and-attack formation.

The eyes of the Cavalry members, who had been holding off monsters, sparkled with determination.

Their training in the Cavalry had not been limited to practical combat. Kishiar had taught them literacy, as well as theoretical knowledge usually reserved for knights and soldiers, including the types of monsters and how to counter them.

The types and countermeasures of monsters were based on the valuable lessons recorded through the hard-earned experiences of the Peletta Knights, followers of Kishiar. Initially, those who had just joined the Cavalry wondered why they had to learn such things, suffering through the training. However, after experiencing its utility in the West, they ceased their complaints.

The lessons introduced various advantageous combat forms against monsters, including the lure-and-attack formation ordered by Kishiar. “This method is especially effective against large, slow-moving monsters. A small group of our strongest will engage each monster individually, while the rest will scatter to lure away and stall the remaining monsters,” it was explained.

But this wasn’t just about indiscriminately stalling or luring. The crux of this tactic was the coordinated movements of the remaining troops, ensuring the elite few could focus solely on their monstrous adversaries.

Although this method had its drawbacks, its efficacy was unmatched if executed correctly. Should the timings not align, or if the monsters were not lured effectively, or if the elite group failed to swiftly dispatch their foes, the situation could quickly turn perilous for all.

It required perfect trust and execution, with each member fulfilling their role without deviation. And Kishiar, along with Yuder, boldly declared they would undertake the role of the elite few, focusing solely on combating the monsters. This was a decisive choice, despite knowing Yuder's vulnerability to monsters.

"Are you sure about this?" Yuder asked with concern.

"What do you mean?" Kishiar inquired.

"I thought you would have me stay back," Yuder admitted, half-expecting Kishiar might tackle the monsters alone. But Kishiar just smiled, as if to dismiss the notion.

"Would you have obeyed such an order?" he challenged.

"No," Yuder replied, to which Kishiar smiled knowingly.

"I just need you to buy me time to wield my sword while I assess the monsters. That's enough," Kishiar said earnestly, his face a blend of seriousness and slyness.

Yuder, albeit slightly depleted in strength and knowing his efforts might not significantly harm the monsters, understood his role was not about brute force. His experience in drawing the enemy's attention and creating openings was what mattered. And in this regard, no one was more experienced than Yuder Aile.

Kishiar trusted Yuder implicitly to create the opportunities he needed. This was the first time Kishiar felt confident in someone else's ability to handle the attack on his behalf.

'This is good,' he thought. With Nathan Zuckerman also due to return, they would have additional support. Yuder nodded firmly, resolved.

"Understood. Leave it to me."

Kishiar’s eyes twinkled with amusement as he unwrapped the cloth bound around the hilt of his divine sword, revealing its true form beneath the unassuming exterior.

“Set up the formation! Lure one monster each to Commander and Yuder!”

Unaware of Yuder’s weakness, the other members of the Cavalry had already started moving without hesitation. The first to bring a monster for combat was Yergin Schiller, who had earlier dealt with a southern merchant alongside Yuder.

Despite some wounds on her body, Yergin exhibited skilled movements, using the power of the wind to draw the monster towards them. Her eyes lit up at the sight of Kishiar’s sword.

“That sword…! Could it be a divine sword?! Wow… Ah! Oops.”

“Be careful.”

Yuder, noticing her momentary distraction due to excitement, lightly used the power of the earth. With a minimal effort, he created a small depression in the ground, causing the massive monster to stagger and its attack to falter.

Yergin, having nimbly dodged the creature with her wind manipulation, expressed her gratitude to Yuder.

“Thanks, Yuder! I’m not sure if our Commander is a swordmaster or has abilities like Jimmy, but being part of this historic moment, capturing monsters with a divine sword, feels amazing! Now, please take care of the first one!”

As she darted back after her playful remark, Kishiar, responding with a smile, raised his sword.

“I shall.”

The divine sword Orr, filled with an aura of anticipation, was suddenly enveloped in a blue light, unleashing sharp attacks in accordance with its master's intent.

It took three strikes for the first monster to fall, losing limbs and other body parts in the process, completely pierced by Kishiar's attack.

"Wow!"

As the monster collapsed with a thud, cheers erupted from afar. The joy of their strategy's success and the rapid spread of hope that they could indeed prevail filled the air.

Then, the second and third monsters, lured by the Cavalry members, began to approach. Yuder, alternating between his sword and a bit of his power, did his utmost to prevent the monsters' desperate attacks from reaching Kishiar.

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Chapter 731

Then, the second and third monsters, lured by the Cavalry members, began to approach. Yuder, alternating between his sword and a bit of his power, did his utmost to prevent the monsters' desperate attacks from reaching Kishiar.

Kishiar managed to dispatch up to the fifth monster without even swinging his sword more than a few times, using unilateral and overwhelming power. The speed of his actions was truly astonishing.

Thanks to this, the Cavalry members had the luxury of becoming accustomed to the lure-and-attack formation in actual combat, a tactic they were trying for the first time. Initially a bit hasty and mistimed, they gradually became composed and started to move in unison, like a single large entity.

The imperial army and the candidates, witnessing Kishiar's overwhelming swordsmanship and the divine sword in his hand, regained their confidence and composure, infused with newfound hope. The anxiety to hasten matters faded, allowing them to move the Awakeners of the Star of Nagran inside the building without disrupting the encirclement. It was a remarkable achievement, made possible by meticulously executing each step in a task they were performing for the first time.

No casualties needing urgent evacuation had arisen yet. Although many must have seen the monster falling from the sky, rushing toward the headquarters seemed unlikely at this point.

The fact that monsters had appeared remained unchanged. However, the results differed significantly depending on whether one acted in panic or maintained calm and composure.

To Yuder, it seemed that Kishiar was well aware of this and was using it more effectively than anyone else.

His very first words were already a calculated move. Everyone knows that a crack appears briefly when a monster emerges, but he deliberately downplayed the anomaly in the crack, focusing only on the familiar aspects to quickly dispel the chaos.

Normally, the cracks that tear open during a monster's emergence disappear as soon as the monster fully materializes, usually so swiftly that it's hard to discern the crack.

However, cracks that appear right before a disaster, which do not immediately release monsters, show an abnormal persistence. In the west, monsters had explosively emerged after such cracks disappeared; this time, there was a delay before the monsters emerged, but it was not typical.

Nevertheless, a 'crack' appeared followed by 'monsters'. Kishiar deliberately emphasized this point to prevent people from becoming excessively anxious about the unusual aspects. He helped them accept the current situation as familiar, enabling them to regain their usual strength and response capabilities.

The ability to succinctly end all this turmoil with just a few words was not an easy task, even for a seasoned leader.

After calming the people, he deliberately exerted more force to eliminate the monsters conspicuously. Even if this meant excessively expending energy, it was a necessary action deemed for the benefit of those present.

Kishiar's swordsmanship and abilities were indeed formidable, but he, like Yuder, had already expended a significant amount of power before arriving here. Rather than using such overwhelming and excessive force from the beginning, it would have been a safer

decision for him to go a little slower to understand the monster's nature and information.

But Kishiar chose not to proceed as expected. He opted for a more perilous approach for the sake of the members present and others, entrusting Yuder with the task of understanding the monsters and ensuring his own safety.

Yuder understood that even a slight faltering in his support could put Kishiar in immediate danger, yet Kishiar had made this decision regardless.

The reason was clear.

'Because he believed that I would firmly support him. And conversely… Kishiar was confident that he could prevent me from having to directly exert my strength against the monsters.'

Yuder watched Kishiar, who was wholly focused on the battle, brushing away the blinding shards flying towards him.

In this perilous situation, armed with only a sword, Kishiar appeared more liberated than ever. His unbelievable speed and tremendous strength against the much larger monsters made it all possible.

However, Kishiar's apparent freedom did not mean the task was easy. Yuder, even as a mere observer, could feel the intense concentration Kishiar was applying to the task at hand.

Each movement, laden with power, might seem to others as just great strength or a tremendous aura, but the reality was different. Kishiar was not someone who, like ordinary people, could freely attack using all his strength.

If he failed to maintain the balance of the powers within his body, problems could arise, making it imperative to stay within a safe limit.

Even Yuder could hardly guess how difficult this was.

‘Yet still’

The sight of the man swinging his aura-wrapped sword, evading the monster’s attacks, seemed incongruously liberating. It was as if a beast, long restrained by a leash, had finally been set free to run wild for a moment.

Yuder thought that perhaps this moment marked the first time in Kishiar La Orr’s life that he could purely focus on facing his enemy. While such an experience was common for Yuder, it was likely not the case for Kishiar.

His swordsmanship, honed in solitude and intense practice, was purely beautiful, even without a dazzling aura.

The divine sword in his hand hummed softly with each strike, resonating as if excited by a long battle, like an eager beast.

Frankly, Yuder wished he could continue to watch, but he remembered the importance of his role in ensuring Kishiar could keep his complete focus on the battle.

‘I’ve never seen this monster before… but that doesn’t mean it’s difficult to understand.’

The monster they were facing was quite large. Its body resembled a mud clump rolling downhill, with limbs or perhaps tails, or squid-like tentacles protruding long and unclear. The key point was that, despite appearing randomly placed, the limbs clustered in four to five areas.

When assessing a monster, one should first notice such common features. Understanding where the eyes, nose, and mouth are, and identifying unique aspects of its appearance, makes it easier to strategize.

‘This one doesn’t have a fixed position for eyes, nose, or mouth on each individual. These seem to be less useful organs compared to its limbs. And considering the monster corpse that Kishiar split in half earlier’

Yuder’s gaze returned to the pile of monster carcasses Kishiar had accumulated. Among them, the very first one that Kishiar had slain and split precisely in half revealed something resembling soft bones connected to four clusters of legs, attached to some part inside. Though the halved state made it difficult to discern its original form, a focused look allowed Yuder to somewhat understand its structure.

His eyes, currently shining with a golden hue from exerting power, meticulously scanned that area.

Though he would have preferred a more detailed examination by touch, there was no time for that now. Still, from experience, he was certain that this area was likely a weakness.

‘Even the monsters that didn’t die immediately when Kishiar split them in half seem to have their core located in a spot he couldn’t damage instantly. Instead of targeting the center indiscriminately, I need to identify the point where these leg clusters intersect. Given the randomness of the monster’s leg positions, the location of the core must be similarly unpredictable.’

Yuder Aile’s attacks hardly affected the monsters.

But his reign as a Cavalry Commander capable of slaying countless monsters was simple. It was his tenacity in observing and re-observing the monsters, which others shunned, to identify their weaknesses and devise methods to defeat them.

Once a weakness was identified, the next step was to prepare weapons capable of indirect attacks and to create, through his power, a terrain advantageous for an assault, corralling the monster

into it. It was a trap-like method, perfected through immense capability and thorough preparation.

While he couldn't apply this method now, the information would certainly be helpful to Kishiar.

"Commander! You must target between the clusters of the monster's legs. The core connecting these clusters exists inside the torso, so first identify and attack that spot."

As Yuder relayed this information, he swung his power-infused sword at the monster Kishiar was engaging. Seizing a brief moment when part of the monster's legs were trapped on the ground, he thrust his flame-powered sword into the torso, pushing it away, igniting whatever fur or scales were there, leaving a blackened brand.

A terrible scream filled the air.

'Done.'

As Yuder leaped back upon achieving his goal, Kishiar advanced in turn, precisely targeting the branded area with his sword.

For a fleeting moment, their gazes locked.

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Chapter 732

For a fleeting moment, their gazes locked.

Though the exchange was brief, Yuder was certain of the outcome of his attack.

He had cut it perfectly. It’s bound to succeed.

After his sword, wrapped in a blue aura, had passed through, the monster, centered around the mark left by Yuder, split precisely into four pieces and collapsed. Kishiar, who had leaped over the corpse he created, landed smoothly; his cloak billowed and then settled. The fluids from the battle had soiled his once-pristine appearance, yet they did nothing to diminish the man’s serene and overwhelming strength.

Shortly after, Kishiar, exhaling briefly, flicked his sword to shed the fluids, and turned to Yuder with a smile.

…

Those who witnessed the flawlessly executed joint attack, not prearranged but as if planned, were unable to tear their eyes away from the spectacle, despite knowing they needed to move swiftly. Yuder felt the same.

Kishiar’s movements seemed to read his intentions perfectly. No, they definitely did. Even without explicit instructions on where to strike, Kishiar’s timely and precise attacks, coinciding with the chilling thrill Yuder felt during their brief gaze, lingered electrifyingly throughout his body.

It was a sensation that could almost be described as exhilarating.

However, the time Kishiar and Yuder could gaze at each other was exceedingly brief. Before they could exchange a word, a Cavalry member, leading the next monster and waving a hand scarred and scraped, called for their attention.

“Next!”

Yuder swiftly sprang into action, taking a deep breath.

But even as he marked the next monster, and then another, the exhilarating sense of control over his body did not completely fade.

Yuder Aile, with his black hair, alternately used various attributes, difficult to discern, to create openings and mark the monsters. Kishiar, without any signal, would then precisely strike the marked spot, efficiently killing the beast.

Mark, kill. And then mark, kill again.

Even as the Cavalry members bringing the next monsters momentarily faltered, or the creatures deviated unexpectedly, they remained unshaken.

The almost miraculous sight irresistibly drew the attention of all present, including those maintaining the perimeter and those from the Star of Nagrans Southern stronghold under surveillance.

…swordmaster.

Sera, sitting bound, turned her head to a murmured voice beside her. An Imperial Special Forces soldier, overseeing the captured Awakeners of Star of Nagran, watched the battlefield, his eyes wide with awe and admiration.

“Unbelievable. To think I am seeing this with my own eyes. Duke Peletta a swordmaster…”

“Are you sure about him being a swordmaster? There are others among us who can wield a sword with aura-like power.”

Another Imperial soldier asked, keeping his voice low, but his eyes too, remained fixated on Kishiar, who was showing overwhelming prowess without faltering against the monsters.

“Yes. That man is my closest colleague. So, I know better. It’s real. Completely different from the power of an Awakener. Don’t you feel it too?”

The inquired soldier didn’t reply, but his silence was as good as an agreement.

And it was the same for Sera and the others from the Stars of Nagran, an absurd situation, but they too understood the truth in those words.

The Cavalry Commander, Duke of Peletta, Kishiar La Orr, was known to everyone as an Awakener. Similarly, the news of his recent acquisition of the new divine sword was so widely known that there was hardly anyone who didn’t know of it.

Yet, no one could have imagined that he was such an extraordinary swordsman and a swordmaster capable of generating a perfect aura. Even while watching, it was hard to believe one’s eyes.

The movements of Duke Peletta were nothing like those of mercenaries who boastfully wield swords, nor were they like those of average knights. He seemed as though he had been one with the sword since birth.

Even the strong Cavalry members, who had captured Sera and her colleagues without allowing them to properly resist, found themselves struggling against the monster. Yet Kishiar, facing the same beast, showed no difficulty in his swordplay.

His sword strikes were not flashy or hesitant, but simply cut through, again and again.

Whatever his sword touched, it cleanly severed. Even the tough shells that other attacks could barely scratch, and the insides that seemed soft yet tenaciously caught allies, stood no chance against Kishiar’s strikes.

The act of cutting.

It was the first time she truly felt the essence and identity of a sword being so vividly demonstrated in its simplicity.

And that’s why it was frightening.

The more one saw of this being, accomplishing the seemingly trivial yet unbelievable, the more overwhelmingly terrifying it became, the unknown within it becoming more apparent.

Every citizen of the Orr Empire grows up hearing tales of the owners of the divine sword. Most of the chosen wielders of the divine sword Orr were renowned swordmasters, possessing skills and stature fitting for the sword.

Seeing him now, no one could doubt that he was the new owner of the divine sword.

She bit her lip in fear. Even in the chaotic situation created by the sudden appearance of monsters, the enemies who had perfectly subdued them and brought them here were far more formidable than they were. The fact that there were injured among Sera and her colleagues but no fatalities, despite their desperate struggle, was proof enough. After all, capturing enemies unharmed is known to be twice as difficult as killing them.

But what frustrated her more was something else - the familiar faces among the Imperial soldiers monitoring them.

‘Why are those who disappeared from our base here…?’

Sera had thought those who fled from the southern base were not worth her concern. Maybe if the Sage had ordered their retrieval, things might have been different, but in the current situation, communication was not easy.

Not wanting to take on more responsibility by chasing after them, she had focused on stabilizing the base with the southern merchants, never imagining it would come back to haunt her like this.

The trusted southern merchants died too easily, and her colleagues who trusted and followed her were captured disgracefully. The Awakeners from the central base, captured with her, seemed to regard the southern base Awakeners, including Sera, as traitors who acted against the Sage’s will, refusing even to meet their eyes.

Their attitude only worsened after seeing Sera’s surprised reaction to the recently-passed-the-test Cavalry trainees who had originally escaped the southern base.

Even the recently-passed-the-test Cavalry trainees did not give Sera a proper answer about the current situation. They simply looked at her pitifully, yet coldly, saying, ‘We are now part of the Cavalry, and we do not wish to speak with you any further.’

Having only saved her own life, everything was a mess. She wondered where it all went wrong.

Did the Sage know about all this? And the southern merchants who had died without a word?

Amidst the confusion and regret, Sera looked for any opportunity to escape.

It seemed unlikely that the Duke of Peletta could handle the vast and mighty monsters alone for long.

Indeed, his movements had slowed down a bit since the ninth monster. It had started after he narrowly deflected an attack aimed at Yuder Aile by a transformed leg of the monster, grazing his arm in the process.

Those who had expected Yuder to easily handle the attack without the Duke's intervention were surprised by his choice to intervene, but fortunately, it seemed not to be a serious injury, and the confusion soon settled.

Following this, Yuder Aile began to move more fiercely, and so far, their counterattacks hadn't shown any significant vulnerabilities.

However, the scorched sleeve of his once white garment, now turned black, was notably visible. The force behind their monster-slaying hadn't weakened, but everyone knew it wasn't good to prolong the fight.

Still, the Duke of Peletta and Yuder Aile were managing well, unlike other Cavalry members who were visibly struggling more with the remaining monsters. The number of perilous moments, when they almost got seriously injured failing to block the monsters' attacks, was increasing. It was a clear sign that their stamina was reaching its limits.

If things continued this way, the formation might break, or some would have to retreat, requiring backup. In the ensuing chaos, it seemed possible to find a chance to escape.

Just a little longer

Sera watched the monsters held by the Cavalry members, looking for an indirect way to exert her power. Just as she was about

to turn to a colleague who could help, a slight breeze blew from somewhere.

Moments later, a fresh surge of energy passed over their heads, and the part of the monster facing Kishiar was cleanly sliced off.

Amidst the surprise, someone landed from a high point before them.

It was a knight with distinctly southern features and a cold face.

…Sir Zuckerman!

Someone called out with evident relief. The southern knight didn't respond to the voice calling him, focusing only on the Duke and Yuder Aile. Taking advantage of the monster's halt from being sliced, Kishiar, stabbed and killed it. He then took the opportunity of the time until the next monster arrived to stop and turn his head. Yuder Aile beside him did the same.

"Nathan. You've finally arrived."

"Yes. Adjutant Nathan Zuckerman, reporting back now."

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Chapter 733

“Nathan. You’ve finally arrived.”

“Yes. Adjutant Nathan Zuckerman, reporting back now.”

The exchange between the lord and his adjutant was strikingly calm, making it difficult to discern whether they were in the midst of a perilous battle against monsters in the city or in a peaceful indoor setting.

However, those who had witnessed what Nathan Zuckerman had just done were silently doubting their eyes. And for good reason, as the attack Zuckerman had just unleashed was not something an ordinary knight could perform.

“Wait a minute. Didn’t the attack by Sir Zuckerman look like an aura? Could it be… that Sir Zuckerman is an Awakener like us?”

“Shouldn’t the first question be whether he was a swordmaster?”

The murmuring Cavalry members were soon joined by the Imperial Army, exchanging words with excited expressions.

“I knew from the underground arena that this knight’s skills were extraordinary. But a knight who can use aura… Could he actually be a true swordmaster?”

“If that’s the case, it would be quite a sensation.”

“Regardless, the important thing is that we no longer need to worry about that monster!”

True to their words, Nathan Zuckerman immediately joined the battle upon assessing the situation. His role was not to relieve

Kishiar, but to support the Cavalry members who were struggling to maintain a defensive formation.

His sword no longer glowed blue, but it was enough. Just the addition of one man's strength made it significantly easier for the Cavalry members to combat the monsters compared to before.

When only two monsters remained, Kishiar and Nathan each took one as if by agreement. A few with an eye for swordsmanship realized that the sword techniques of the two men were quite similar.

This was because Nathan Zuckerman had learned swordsmanship from his lord, but no one had realized that yet.

Yuder Aile, along with the other Cavalry members, supported the two swordsmen, using various attributes generously. To onlookers, it seemed as if his presence alone created more opportunities and lured the monsters better than the entire Cavalry combined.

Yuder Aile, who had successfully marked the vital parts of the monsters while dodging them, leaped high into the air, stepping on the wind. The monsters' legs stretched out unnaturally long in a last-ditch effort to catch his ankles but stiffened in a twitch.

It was because Kishiar and Nathan Zuckerman had simultaneously pierced and sliced through the bodies of the two monsters.

One monster immediately lost strength in the leg that had reached for Yuder, falling like a pruned branch. However, the other was different. Its leg stretched abnormally long in a desperate attempt to strike at Yuder.

It was a similar situation to when Kishiar had been grazed by an attack. But this time, there was no time for Kishiar to intervene.

Just when everyone anticipated a minor injury to Yuder, something astonishing happened.

“Ah…!”

Yuder Aile swiftly twisted his body in mid-air, shooting wind downwards. As he changed his position, the monster’s leg aiming for his ankle hopelessly entangled itself around Yuder’s sword.

With a chillingly fierce look in his eyes, Yuder tightly gripped it and shouted.

“Cavalry! All-out attack!”

At his command, all the Cavalry members reflexively exerted their power. It was a reflex born of constant drilling, but the result was definitive.

An intertwining of forces beyond comprehension struck directly at the monster’s body and the leg that had ensnared Yuder’s sword.

Then Kishiar La Orr seized the opportunity, unleashing his aura in a powerful strike that shredded what remained of the monster’s flesh.

After the blinding light that swept through, too intense to keep one’s eyes open, passed, a powerful voice echoed through the dust and monster fluid-covered area.

“…I confirm that the last monster has been dealt with. Everyone, you have worked hard.”

“Ah…!”

Upon hearing Kishiar’s voice, those around finally collapsed in their places, panting heavily. Someone shouted in triumph, raising their weapon towards the sky.

“Woooh!”

“We did it! We really did it!”

Nobody had died. There was no civilian casualty, nor any collateral damage such as building collapses.

The outcome, unbelievable for a monster battle in the heart of the city, filled everyone with joy.

“…”

Yuder watched Kishiar’s back as he observed the rejoicing people. Kishiar’s golden hair, caked with black monster fluid and dust, and his sweaty nape seemed unfamiliar yet oddly fitting.

Just before, he had been infuriated to the point of turning white, but now, looking at his back, Yuder was reminded of the Harvest Festival. Then, Kishiar had stood alone, dressed in dazzling formal attire, appearing both terribly lonely and unaffected, his expression inscrutable like a solid mask.

But now, his back seemed entirely different, though he was the same person. He stood like a great tree among the people trusting and cheering for him. His dirty, disheveled appearance and clothing suited him better than the splendid formal attire. Although only his back was visible, and his facial expression unknown, the movement of his shoulders and back with every command and breath was enough to surmise his emotions.

It was the back of a man physically exhausted but emotionally feeling the tangible result of a battle and victory achieved by his own hands. The sensation of boiling blood not yet cooled was all too familiar to Yuder.

“…Phew.”

Yuder exhaled deeply and sheathed his dirty sword. Just then, someone beside him spoke.

“A strange crack and monsters in the middle of the city. Looks like we won’t be able to leave here for a while.”

“…Yes. It seems our stay will be longer than planned, so I’m thinking of contacting the North.”

Yuder replied, turning his head. Nathan Zuckerman, equally covered in monster fluid and looking quite a mess, quietly met his gaze.

What was going through his mind was unknown, but one thing was clear. Yuder knew he had to apologize for not properly utilizing the opportunity Zuckerman had personally conceded.

“I’m sorry.”

“What for?”

“I was here, yet Commander got injured. I have no words.”

Would Kishiar have gone to such lengths to block the monster if it had been Nathan there instead of Yuder? Yuder thought not. So, this was entirely his fault.

Yuder recalled the moment Kishiar’s arm was hit. It was dreadful. He had never felt so infuriated in this life for being almost unable to attack the monster directly.

Nathan Zuckerman’s head turned slightly. He noticed that one of Kishiar’s sleeves was charred black and melting away as Kishiar continued to issue follow-up instructions to the members and others. Then, he turned back to Yuder and spoke.

“Do you think I am disappointed because of that?”

“Isn’t that the case?”

“Well, looking at our lord’s current state, it seems that what I hoped for when I first sent Sir Aile to him has already been sufficiently fulfilled.”

Yuder frowned briefly, puzzled by what Kishiar’s injury meant in this context. He then considered that Nathan Zuckerman’s words might be a form of consolation.

“…I’m not sure what you mean, but an injury is still an injury. Once he finishes giving instructions, I will take care of the rest. Please, Sir Zuckerman, accompany the Commander inside and see to his condition.”

“I agree with your sentiment, but I’m not sure if that will be possible.”

Before Yuder could ask what he meant, Nathan Zuckerman preempted his question with an answer.

“I suspect our lord will give me the exact opposite order. When you changed direction abruptly in the air, I saw your right hand twist awkwardly. Doesn’t it hurt?”

Yuder looked down at his right hand, which still throbbed faintly after sheathing his sword. As Nathan said, in the last moment, when he had explosively reversed direction in the air using the power of the wind, his right hand, holding the sword, had twisted slightly. The strain had probably worsened when he used his strength to keep hold of his sword, ensnared by the monster’s leg. However, Yuder didn’t consider it a serious injury.

But as Yuder was about to respond, Kishiar, who had turned his head as if he had sensed their conversation, spoke to them.

“Nathan. Take Yuder inside first and have his right hand checked.”

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Chapter 734

“Nathan. Take Yuder inside first and have his right hand checked.”

Nathan Zuckerman blinked as if asking if he had seen it too. He had the knack of conveying his intentions clearly with an impassive face.

Yuder acknowledged that he, indeed, has an exceptional ability to read the minds of Kishiar, befitting an old adjutant. However, that didnt mean he planned to leave Nathan Zuckerman to follow that order. Yuder immediately spoke up.

“My hand is fine. Shouldn’t we prioritize examining the Commander’s arm instead?”

“I’ve already given it a temporary fix.”

Kishiar gestured with one hand, directing the Cavalry members elsewhere, and replied calmly. There was no need to ask when he had done this, as both Yuder and Nathan Zuckerman knew that Kishiar possessed divine powers.

However, people with divine power can only temporarily mend their own wounds. Stopping the bleeding might be feasible, but the healing ends once their own strength and energy diminish.

“That’s good. It seems appropriate for you to see a priest or physician now.”

“I’ve bought myself enough time not to do that. There are many urgent matters to address right now, so it’s more logical for those in immediate need to receive treatment first.”

“No. There is no one who would seek treatment before the person they serve.”

“There could be situations where that’s possible.”

Kishiar, with a twisted smile, gestured towards a spot. There, injured Cavalry members were gathered, attending to each other’s wounds and wrapping bandages brought from the branch office. Some, who appeared more severely injured, were being assisted to move, evidently following Kishiar’s recent order to prioritize their treatment.

Yuder, anticipating such a response, remained determined.

…

Though slightly overwhelmed, he didn’t give up. Yuder tried to persuade Kishiar again. Meanwhile, Nathan Zuckerman had briefly left and returned, but Yuder paid no attention to that.

So……

Just as Yuder was about to speak again, a large hand casually grasped his shoulder, blocking him. The person stepping forward was Nathan Zuckerman.

“Listening to this, it seems like the conversation is being prolonged over a simple solution.”

“Do you have another plan?”

“Yes. I just briefly checked outside the encirclement, and it seems a guest worthy of the Duke’s attention has arrived. I’ll handle things here, so please escort the Duke there and get treated on the way. That will solve all problems.”

Nathan Zuckerman added an explanation, as if understanding what Yuder was about to say.

“Although I’m not part of the Cavalry, I’ve dealt with post-monster incidents several times in Peletta. I dont think this place requires a different approach. As for other urgent matters, our lord must have already given orders, and for the rest, it’s just a matter of coordinating with others.”

Nathan Zuckerman, as the representative of the Peletta Knights and Kishiar’s adjutant, had worked closely on many occasions. Thus, he was familiar with all the Cavalry members here.

Surprisingly, he too was undoubtedly capable of handling this situation.

‘But Nathan Zuckerman staying behind alone, leaving an injured Kishiar in this situation?’

It seemed unbelievable, but then again, that knight had already made a similar choice before.

“…Are you truly not angry that Kishiar was injured despite sending me ahead?”

Nathan Zuckerman had claimed not to be angry, but Yuder hadn’t believed he was sincere. However, if he truly wasn’t… At that moment, when Yuder’s expression subtly shifted, Kishiar burst into laughter.

“Indeed, Nathan, a wise suggestion that saves time and satisfies everyone.”

“Yes. And I am unharmed and perfectly fine.”

“Alright, I’ll follow your advice.”

Thus, Yuder found himself accompanying Kishiar. It all happened so quickly, leaving no room for further discussion.

Outside the still-maintained encirclement by the Imperial Army, it was quite chaotic. There were people who had evacuated because of the Star of Nagran, a few soldiers and knights in the uniform of the security force, a handful of crazed onlookers, and others insistently trying to push their way through.

‘Well, I had anticipated this.’

Yuder’s gaze shifted to a carriage stopped behind the chaotic crowd. The carriage, bearing the crest of the Herne family, was familiar.

‘As expected. That’s why Nathan Zuckerman said that.’

As if sensing his gaze, the door opened, and Myra El Herne, the First Princess of Herne, stepped out. Unlike before, she approached them quickly without wearing a robe to cover her face. The knights following her quickened their pace in response.

The Herne family’s influence in the South wasn’t as strong as the Tain family in the West, but it was still significant. People, realizing someone of importance had arrived, quietly made way. Myra, with a pale face, spoke as she approached.

“I saw a large monster falling from the sky while returning to my quarters after talking with the knights. I immediately turned my carriage here, but they wouldn’t let me in, saying it was dangerous.”

“That’s so. I’m sorry about that. We needed to block access around here because a battle was underway,” Kishiar replied.

Myra, biting her lip, observed Yuder’s disheveled appearance and Kishiar, who was also in a notably bad state. She seemed to have

many questions, but quickly realized it wasn't appropriate to discuss more in such a public place.

Instead, she asked just one more question, loud enough for the anxious people around to hear.

"So, is everything under control inside? Have all the monsters been dealt with?"

"Yes. We've taken care of them all. We're currently dealing with the corpses. There's not much destruction, so once the cleanup is done, everyone can return."

"That's a relief."

People around who heard the conversation between Kishiar and Myra murmured among themselves.

"Did you hear? No major damage!"

"How could there be no damage with such huge monsters falling?"

"Are they really saying there's no damage?…"

"And the Cavalry at the arena…"

"The Cavalry…"

As the cavalry's name echoed around and the crowd grew louder, they moved inside the branch office.

Myra's expression turned to shock at the sight of the craters, dismembered corpses, and black fluids that filled the scene.

"Truly… the Cavalry killed them all. So many and so large, and so quickly…"

Hearing it was one thing, but seeing the actual battlefield was evidently a different experience. The knights accompanying her, previously brimming with arrogance, quickly quieted down as well.

Kishiar responded with a quiet smile.

“I’ve only done what needed to be done.”

“In fact, I came with the knights to offer assistance, but it seems that was unnecessary.”

“We still need help, actually. We’re short on hands for the cleanup.”

“Then use the people I’ve brought with me. Do you need a priest as well?”

“Did you bring a priest too?”

“I summoned a priestess on the way here, so she should be arriving soon.”

“She will arrive quicker than those we would have called.”

“Moreover, she is discreet enough to be trusted with treatment. She is not from the Herne family but connected to me. The Empress herself knows who she is, so you can be at ease.”

In a foreign land with few acquaintances, such aid was most valuable. Finding someone to trust with treatment in a place lacking local natives or influential families was a considerable challenge, especially when injured.

Kishiar seemed well aware of this, his smile growing a bit broader.

“It seems we have formed a beneficial alliance. I’ll gratefully accept your help.”

“Thanks to the Cavalry swiftly dealing with those dreadful monsters, Charloin remained unharmed and peaceful. If anything, I too have received help, so it’s only right that I do my part.”

Her demeanor was remarkably steadfast, considering she had just seen her brother’s corpse. Her ability to prioritize what she must protect over her personal feelings, thinking first of the people of the South, was impressive.

If such a person had been the Duke of Herne, perhaps the great earthquake in the South in his previous life wouldn’t have led to such devastating consequences.

It wasn’t long before the priestess Myra had summoned appeared. A middle-aged woman in priestly robes, she seemed slightly surprised at the assembly of people waiting inside the branch office, but quickly composed herself and spoke.

“I am Galleum, a priestess from the Charloin Mataroa village branch. Who needs my assistance?”

“Right here,” Yuder pointed to Kishiar without hesitation. Kishiar raised his eyebrows slightly, as if he was a bit late in responding, but he didn’t refuse the treatment.

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Chapter 735

Kishiar removed his outer garment and rolled up his sleeves, revealing long, black marks that seemed to have been left by a worm's trail. These were scars from a monster's leg, which had melted both the fabric and his skin. The charred, blackened skin was swollen, looking as if it had been crudely stitched back together.

Although there was no bleeding, the wound's peculiar appearance suggested it was far from healed.

Is this a trace of emergency treatment using divine power? thought Galleum, a priestess who had introduced herself as such. Her keen eyes narrowed upon seeing the mark, recognizing it as the work of divine power.

Under normal circumstances, anyone would wonder why they were summoned when another priest had clearly been there before. But Galleum simply took a deep breath and remained silent.

Indeed, she was the 'discreet individual' confidently recommended by Lady Myra, the First Princess.

"It seems to have been grazed by a monster's attack. It appears to have some toxicity."

"Yes. You might feel some pain while I channel the divine power. If it becomes unbearable, please let me know."

Without asking the identity of the handsome man with golden hair and red eyes before her, Galleum immediately began to summon her divine power. A bright white light gathered in her hands and soon cascaded over the wound, illuminating the area.

Kishiar watched silently as his wound transformed, the flesh regenerating anew. Contrary to expectations of pain, his expression remained unchanged.

“It’s all done. The wound may look clean, but it’s freshly healed and very fragile. I advise you to avoid any strain for a few days.”

“Your skill is remarkable. I’m grateful,” Kishiar said, his face breaking into a picture-perfect smile. Indeed, Galleum’s divine power was impressive, rivaling that of the priests in the capital.

“Now, could you also look at his right hand? It seems to have been strained during the battle.”

Kishiar, having just received treatment, nonchalantly grasped Yuder’s hand and presented it to Galleum. Yuder remained quiet, not uttering a word.

Galleum hesitated upon seeing Yuder’s hand covered by a black glove.

“The glove might obscure a proper assessment of the injury. Would you prefer to receive treatment with it on?”

Her consideration for Yuder’s potential predicaments once again demonstrated her exemplary nature as a priestess.

‘What should I do?’

As Yuder hesitated, Myra quickly stood up.

“It seems time for me to relay instructions to those I brought for cleanup. I have separate matters to discuss with the other priests who followed Priestess Galleum. I’ll step out for a moment.”

Sensing that Yuder’s reluctance to remove his glove was due to the gaze of others, she tactfully took the two knights guarding her

and left the room.

Yuder’s glove hid his hand, marked with dark red veins a nuisance to explain to others. But seeing the lengths they went to for his comfort, he felt no need to endure the inconvenience of being treated with his glove on. Trusting a priestess of Galleum’s character, who would neither pry for explanations nor leak information carelessly, Yuder slowly pulled off his glove.

Galleum, upon seeing the dark red, branch-like veins stretching from Yuder’s hand to his sleeve, predictably refrained from any unnecessary questions.

“Could you please specify where exactly you feel discomfort?”

“Please look at the wrist joint, not the skin.”

Galleum nodded in understanding when Yuder explained that the injury occurred while wielding a weapon and abruptly changing direction.

“The area around your wrist is indeed quite swollen. Understood.”

She pressed around Yuder’s wrist several times to assess the condition and then infused it with divine power. After a cool, refreshing sensation passed, Yuder felt the swelling in his wrist significantly reduce.

Even after rotating his wrist several times, he felt no discomfort.

“Is there any other discomfort?” she asked.

“No, thank you.”

Upon receiving his gratitude, Galleum’s expression finally softened a bit.

“I am pleased to be able to offer even a small help to those who fought selflessly to protect Charloin.”

“I will certainly remember Priestess Galleum’s assistance and ensure proper recompense in the future,” Kishiar responded.

Galleum shook her head at Kishiar’s words, adding that she hadn’t come seeking remembrance.

“Is the treatment complete?”

Not long after, Myra returned, now alone without the knights who had been following her.

“Galleum, I’ve asked the other priests who came with you to tend to the other injured here. There are no serious injuries, but many are exhausted. Could you continue to assist with this for the day?”

“Of course, First Princess. As a follower of the divine, it is my duty to help without being asked.”

Galleum stood up, bowed politely, and then left the room.

After waiting until Galleum’s footsteps faded away, Myra sat down across from Kishiar with a more relaxed demeanor.

“Now that we’re free from prying eyes, we can talk more comfortably. What exactly happened to the Cavalry after we parted ways?”

“It’s a bit of a long story.”

Kishiar recounted how he was ambushed on his way back, the sudden emergence of a strange crack above a building, and the monsters that poured out from it. Despite summarizing, the enormity of the situation was clear in his retelling. Myra’s expression turned serious, especially when Kishiar mentioned, “I sent people to watch

over Baron Conche's house. We managed to capture the servant of the Second Prince, who was still alive, his horse, and some suspicious individuals."

"You managed to capture all of them, including the servant and the horse? How did you do it so quickly"

"It seemed doable, so we did it," Kishiar replied nonchalantly.

Yuder quietly looked down, feeling a bit odd hearing how matter-of-factly Kishiar spoke of such feats.

The conversation then shifted to the root cause of all these events, involving the Star of Nagran and the Southern merchants.

"The Star of Nagran, a group of Awakeners, tried to infiltrate our Cavalry by planting spies. We've been aware of them for a while, so this wasn't surprising. We can handle this matter on our own, so the First Princess need not worry too much. However, the situation with the Southern merchants is a bit different."

Kishiar briefly explained the Southern merchants and their trial involving Tain Duke. Myra acknowledged that she had heard about the Duke being misled by Southern merchants.

She was shocked to learn that these merchants were not only active here but also suspected to be the true culprits behind her brother, the Second Prince's death.

"Do you mean to say that these Southerners conspired with Baron Conche to destabilize the succession of Herne?"

"It's the most logical conclusion, considering that a year ago, through an introduction by Baron Conche, they infiltrated as a servant to the Second Prince, gaining his trust before orchestrating today's events."

The exact time they had allied with Baron Conche was unknown. It could have been even before they tampered with Duke Tain. Myra's expression hardened as she likely pondered the same timeline.

"I never thought Baron Conche capable of harboring such foolish yet dangerous intentions. It seems we were greatly underestimated. After Ashrav, I was probably their next target, wasn't I?"

The previous Myra, in her former life, might have realized this malicious intent much later.

But not this time. Myra, with her sharp intellect, quickly deduced that the target of these conspirators extended beyond Prince Ashrav.

Her eyes, clenched in determination, sharpened like a razor-edged blade.

"Then I cannot delay any longer. Since you've captured the traitors on the spot, I must head to Baron Conche's estate right away."

"Are you sure that's wise?"

"Thank you for your concern, but some matters, no matter how difficult, cannot be postponed. These traitors not only betrayed the Herne family but also risked the safety of all Charloin. To show everyone the extent of their crimes and their consequences, I must go now."

Kishiar smiled at her and spoke.

"I understand your resolve, and I admire it. In that case, I will provide some Cavalry members and special forces from the Imperial Army to assist you."

“There’s no need to go to such lengths, knowing how busy you are here…”

“Being busy is one thing, but the safety of an ally is equally important. Any harm to the First Princess would no longer be just her concern alone. I want to make that clear.”

Myra was now alone. With the death of Ashrav, the Second Prince, her path to succession seemed smooth, provided no issues arose concerning her.

However, if problems emerged before she could become the successor, the situation would drastically change. When Kishiar pointed out this risk, Myra nodded in agreement, not adding any further words.

“The First Princess has generously provided priests and priestesses and knights to support us; it’s only right that we do the same. Don’t worry about it.”

“Understood. Thank you.”

Myra gracefully rose and offered a formal farewell. As she left the room, her stride was devoid of any hesitation.

Once the room quieted down, Yuder turned to Kishiar. He wanted to ask if Kishiar was alright or if there were any other issues, but there were more pressing matters to discuss.

“With things having come to this, it seems impossible to visit the northern branch before the end of the second batch of recruitment entrance tests.”

“That’s likely. I didn’t expect the Southern merchants to ensnare us this way.”

“I’ll handle communication with the north. And…”

You were going to say we need more help to deal with and investigate these people, right? We'll need more than just those here, so we should request additional support from the headquarters."

"Yes."

Kishiar had already guessed what Yuder was about to say. Yuder thought of those back in the capital and what they could offer.

"We'll definitely need Kanna, and bringing in more whose natives of the southern region would be beneficial."

"If the situation drags on, calling in an apothecary might be wise. His extensive knowledge proved helpful in the West, after all."

"Yes. And also…"

"Oh, wait. A messenger bird has arrived."

Kishiar raised his hand to pause the conversation and stood up to open the window. The bird fluttered in, its legs bound with a cylinder larger than usual, seemingly carrying twice the usual amount of letters.

Kishiar's expression shifted slightly as he examined the outer surface of the cylinder.

"Is this a report from headquarters? I should look into this right away."

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Chapter 736

Kishiar’s expression shifted slightly as he examined the outer surface of the cylinder.

“Is this a report from headquarters? I should look into this right away.”

Typically, Kishiar would first read reports alone, then decide whether to share them with others. However, this time, he beckoned Yuder closer before breaking the seal.

“Can I read it with you?”

“If it’s from the Cavalry, we both need to see it. It’s more efficient to read it together than separately.”

After saying this, he leaned in closer, lowering his voice as if sharing a secret.

“…And using this as an excuse to be closer is my little scheme.”

Suddenly, Yuder became acutely aware of their touching arms and hands. The man, smiling mischievously like a playful boy, embraced Yuder’s shoulder, drawing him closer. Their temples lightly touched.

“It might be impolite to behave this way in our unkempt state… but there’s no time to clean up, so we must make do. Please overlook it.”

Though Kishiar spoke as if he alone was disheveled, Yuder, who had been rolling in the dirt, was actually dirtier. Yet, Kishiar seemed unconcerned, true to his character.

Yuder felt a mix of relief and amusement, realizing that Kishiar harbored similar desires, albeit managing to satisfy both his whims and duties.

Held in the embrace, Yuder gazed down at their clasped hands, slowly relaxing.

“There’s no need to be polite. I’m not exactly pristine myself.”

A brief conversation and close contact were all it took for Yuder to feel a release of tension he’d been holding in his body, ready to react at any moment.

Kishiar, seemingly more aware of this than Yuder, unfolded the report with a melting smile.

“Let’s see what the dust-covered pair of us have been sent. I hope it’s not bad news.”

The report from the Cavalry headquarters was penned by Ever. She had written about recent events and progress in a forceful hand, including a concise greeting.

The report included details about the pursuit of those who fled after an explosion in the capital, caused by Nahan and the Sage. It also mentioned Kanna overseeing the interrogation of captured Awakeners and the opening of the Cavalry’s first interrogation facility for Awakeners.

‘I wonder if Nahan headed south. It’s uncertain whether he’ll return to the southern base or go elsewhere… but somehow, I have a feeling he might come back here. I should prepare for that.’

However, the subsequent news in the report was surprising.

The Emperor has surmised that Baron Renbow might encounter the hidden Sage in Fourth Wall District? So, he told them to

investigate and then they selected personnel skilled in disguise and tracking, but given the characteristics of Fourth Wall District… Wait. Why does this name appear here?’

Yuder momentarily doubted his eyesight when an unexpected name suddenly popped up. Even after blinking several times and re-reading, the name written there was definitely that of the fool Yuder knew.

“I never expected to see the name Kiolle da Diarca here,” Yuder remarked, a sentiment echoed by Kishiar who stood beside him, chuckling in mild disbelief.

“Having a capable assistant, unexpected help sometimes comes from the most unexpected places. Of all the news I heard today, this is the most interesting.”

Yuder remained silent, opting instead to reread the section he had hastily skimmed over.

It began thus:

We learned that the Fourth Wall District, Baron Renbow’s destination, is frequented by nobles on excursions. We believed he would likely choose either a secluded forest or lake for clandestine meetings, and indeed, he headed towards the lake. However, we didn’t anticipate the presence of a certain unexpected figure there…

Ever, since arriving in the capital, felt a thrill at heading to an unexplored destination, discreetly observing her companions. There were seven in total on this mission, including her as the leader.

The team consisted of Hinn Eldore, Finn Eldore, Gakane Bolunwald, Pruelle Van Tain and his brother Nipollen Van Tain (who was now more than a temporary member), and lastly, Revlin Shand Apeto. Nipollen, transformed into a cat and nestled in a small bag, made them appear as only six.

They were en route to the Tain family's private property in the Fourth Wall District, provided by Pruelle for disguise purposes.

"We're here," announced Pruelle as they disembarked the carriage near a beautiful, traditionally styled building. A statue bearing the distinct mark of the Tain family stood imposingly, welcoming guests.

"Thanks to Priscilla's arrangements, the place should be empty now. Please, enter at your leisure."

Ever and Gakane felt a sense of responsibility, while Hinn and Finn crossed the threshold with the excitement of children discovering new toys. Revlin Shand Apeto entered nonchalantly, accustomed to such opulence.

"Oh, look! You can see the entire lake from here!"

"Where? It's true!"

Hinn and Finn exclaimed, mesmerized by the view upon entering the villa. Pruelle laughed, relaxed and at ease.

"Yes. That's why I chose this location. There aren't many safe spots where you can see the entire lake."

Ever had immediately thought of Pruelle for advice upon hearing about Baron Renbow's journey to the Fourth Wall District.

Pruelle, the eldest son of a major noble family, could have been the heir if he wished. Yet, he was remarkably humble and kind. He never once behaved in a way that made others uncomfortable due to his background during his time adapting to the Cavalry, nor did he ever complain about the communal living that must have been uncomfortable for someone of his upbringing.

Even Revlin, who had struggled to shed the refined lifestyle ingrained since childhood, found Pruelle's adaptability remarkable.

Pruelle, who had previously been on a mission with Ever in the West, seemed to feel a particular closeness to her, often coming to her with questions when curious. Thanks to this, Ever became quite familiar with talking to him, to the point where she didn't feel burdened to seek his help when needed.

"Need information for tracking nobility in Fourth Wall District? Hmm… not many commoners visit there without a reason. Perhaps, we could disguise ourselves as if visiting a place I know? Including Revlin, who shares my status, would arouse no suspicion," Pruelle suggested.

Initially hesitant, upon arriving at the villa, they realized Pruelle's suggestion was apt. The location couldn't be more suitable.

"But… is the lake always this deserted?" asked Gakane, somewhat strained, as he gazed into the distance, unsure whether being hassled on each arm by Hinn and Finn was a torment or a sign of affection. Revlin was the first to respond.

"Uh… no. The lake is as popular as the forest. It's not like there are no people to the extent that it's noticeable… but really, there's no one?"

"Is the noble we're pursuing powerful enough to clear out everyone around the lake?" Hinn Eldore inquired, but no one could answer. They knew that wasn't the case, but the emptiness was indeed peculiar.

Pruelle, looking gravely at the deserted lakeside, gently set down the kitten and spoke up.

"I'll go out and investigate."

“Alone? Are you sure that’s safe?”

“I’ll use my abilities. It won’t take long. Please wait.”

Closing his eyes, Pruelle’s form blurred like a mirage, then transformed into an unfamiliar young noble. Those witnessing his shapeshifting for the first time watched in awe. He flashed a smile and bid them farewell.

“I’ve borrowed the appearance of one of my relatives for a moment. I’ll be back soon.”

True to his word, Pruelle returned shortly with the information they needed.

“Knights are blocking access to the area around the lake. They were from the Diarca family.”

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Chapter 737

“Knights are blocking access to the area around the lake. They were from the Diarca family.”

“Diarca?” she inquired.

“Yes. It wasn’t just any member of the Diarca family; there’s only one who could do this. The Duke of Diarca himself.”

Everyone was taken aback. They had come in pursuit of Baron Renbow, but the sudden appearance of the influential Duke of Diarca was unforeseen.

Ever recalled the information that Baron Renbow was one of the nobles who followed the Duke of Diarca. The Emperor had anticipated that the fleeing sage would meet with Baron Renbow, but to find the Duke of Diarca at the very location towards which Renbow was headed was indeed surprising.

It seemed too connected to be a mere coincidence.

“Ever, what should we do?” Gakane asked, his eyes mirroring her thoughts.

Even if they found Baron Renbow, the presence of the Duke of Diarca at the same location would make it difficult for them to approach. It was even more likely if Baron Renbow and the sage were planning to meet the Duke.

But difficulty did not mean impossibility.

The fact that it wasn’t impossible meant there was no reason to give up.

Thus, Ever decided not to retreat. As any member of the Cavalry would think, they had a chance. Her eyes sharpened as she spoke.

“The Emperor’s command was to pursue Baron Renbow, but the underlying reason was to capture the sage. Therefore, our primary concern isn’t the Duke of Diarca or Baron Renbow. It’s finding the sage and his party.”

Silence followed.

“I believe Baron Renbow and the sage have come to meet the Duke of Diarca to find a solution to the current situation. If that’s the case, the sage must be somewhere around here, right?”

“We’re going to find them, then,” Gakane stated, understanding her intent. Ever nodded.

“Exactly. If we combine the strength of everyone here, it’s definitely possible. Of course, it’ll be more dangerous than initially anticipated. If anyone wants to opt out, say it now.”

The members exchanged glances. Then, confident yet tense smiles spread across their faces.

“No one would.”

Naturally, no one expressed a desire to leave.

Pruelle and Revlin, although they had led somewhat different lives from typical nobility, were not devoid of noble understanding. Particularly Revlin, who had lived in the capital all his life, astutely analyzed the situation.

“The knights won’t guard the lakeside indefinitely. The Duke of Diarca likely ordered a temporary restriction to ensure nothing was amiss before using the lake. Since it’s a spot frequented by nobles, even someone of the Duke’s stature can’t block it for hours on end.”

“I see.”

“Once the knights lift the restriction and others start entering the lakeside, we should blend in. If we keep an eye on the Duke’s party, Baron Renbow and the sage will surely appear, especially if their goal is to meet with the Duke.”

Everyone agreed with Revlin’s sensible conclusion. The Eldore siblings laughed wildly and playfully slung an arm around Revlin’s shoulder.

“Exactly. If our target seems to be the Duke, it’s easier to wait at the final destination rather than stirring up everywhere! Smart thinking.”

“Ha… Thank you for the compliment.”

“But still, you need to raise your voice more.”

The Eldore siblings and Revlin whispered amongst themselves, sharing jokes in a casual manner. Their camaraderie had grown thanks to a sense of kinship among the few teenagers in the group during his time as a temporary member.

Ever surmised that Revlin, who had faced many challenges and was still under the scrutiny of his older brother, could brighten up in this manner thanks largely to the uninhibited influence of the boisterous Eldore siblings.

It was a heartwarming sight, but as her gaze shifted to the lake outside the window, her smile faded.

“Just as Revlin said, people are starting to enter the lakeside,” she observed. “Let’s get ready, everyone. We’ll divide into groups to monitor the area and share information.”

Ever split the party into three groups. First, Revlin and the Eldore siblings, donning hats to lightly conceal their hair and features, headed to the lakeside, acting like carefree young nobles.

Following at intervals, Pruelle, transformed into a noblewoman and cradling her cat Nipollen, set out accompanied by Ever, dressed as a plainclothes bodyguard armed with a sword. The idea was that a man holding a cat accompanied by a female escort was a strange sight enough to attract attention, but there was nothing special about a noblewoman doing the same thing.

Gakane, the last of the group, stayed near Pruelle's mansion, his body hidden by a shadow clone. From this vantage point, he could quickly spot and assist any team member in danger.

"The sun's a bit harsh for winter. I think I need a parasol," Pruelle remarked, naturally playing the part of a graceful noblewoman.

"Of course, my lady," Ever responded, as she shielded Pruelle's head with a parasol, scanning their surroundings. The scenic lakeside, bustling with nobles enjoying leisurely walks or relaxing afternoons, was a world apart from the bustling Seventh Wall District where the Cavalry headquarters was located.

The Duke of Diarca was undoubtedly somewhere around, but the large lake, dotted with trees perfect for concealment, made it challenging to spot him immediately. As Ever surveyed the area, she was caught off guard by a voice and lowered her eyes beneath the parasol she was holding.

"Don't look around too much. The essence of being an escort is to never take your eyes off the person you're protecting."

"Ah! I'm sorry. Was I too noticeable?"

"It's hard to miss someone like Miss Beck. I'll watch for you, so don't worry too much."

Pruelle’s voice, though delicate and sharp, was filled with assurance. Knowing who it was, yet hearing such a drastically different manner of speaking, felt like interacting with a completely different person.

Pruelle’s ability to transform into a different gender was no small feat, yet he managed it effortlessly. His gestures and manners were so impeccably noble that onlookers who occasionally showed interest would soon drift away after a few smiles and responses from him.

However, Ever knew from previous discussions that maintaining such a transformation became increasingly difficult over time. The longer this went on, the more taxing it would be for him.

‘We need to find them soon.’

Pretending to tilt the parasol further over Pruelle’s head to shield both their faces, Ever spoke.

“Are your feet hurting by any chance?”

Pruelle, who had been walking steadily, almost stumbled at the question.

“Why do you ask?”

“You’re wearing high heels. It’s fine for a short while, but walking for long must be challenging. If needed, I can carry you.”

Though spoken indirectly, the concern in Ever’s words was evident, worrying that Pruelle might be struggling in his transformed state.

Pruelle remained silent for quite some time before smiling and shaking his head. “It’s a kind gesture, but I’m fine. I’m not that fragile.”

Ever was about to insist that he speak up if he felt strained when Revlin's voice reached their ears.

-Do you hear me? I've found the Duke of Diarca. He seems to have come with his youngest son, Sir Kiolle da Diarca. Head north, towards the fenced Musk trees.-

Revlin's ability to transmit his voice only to specific individuals he chose had grown significantly since he'd broken free from his family's constraints. Now, even at great distances and under certain conditions, he could communicate his intentions.

Ever and Pruelle exchanged glances and, as if on cue, quickened their pace northward.

Revlin's voice continued, updating them with the evolving situation.

-The Duke of Diarca doesn't seem to be waiting for anyone else; he's just talking with Sir Kiolle.-

-Sir Kiolle looks bored… Oh. I think our eyes just met. Maybe he recognized me-

-…No, it seems he didn't after all.-

-Hurry up! Baron Renbow, our target, has just appeared!-

Pruelle quickened his pace, but the limitations of his dress and heels were evident. Ever, noticing Pruelle's near fall, reached out timely to catch the disguised noblewoman and lifted her up with ease.

Her ability to momentarily concentrate immense strength in her fingers could be slightly extended to other body parts, meaning she could easily carry a petite noblewoman and an even tinier kitten.

“Whoa…!”

“Sorry, but bear with me for a moment. It’s better than getting hurt. Hold Nipollen tightly so he doesn’t fall.”

Pruelle, who had been flustered, soon calmed down. Ever was unaware of the blush spreading to his ears.

‘There it is.’

They soon reached an area crowded with people. The most prominent figure was a stoic, noble-looking, raccoon-faced Elder the face Ever had not forgotten since the unfortunate incident at the Cavalry’s recent western mission celebration party. It was undoubtedly the Duke of Diarca.

Beside the Duke stood a young knight with a vexed expression, tall and handsome but with an equally disagreeable demeanor. Ever recognized him well Sir Kiolle da Diarca, infamous in the Cavalry for being soundly defeated by Yuder in a past altercation.

Ever remembered him for another reason. Recently, Sir Kiolle had abruptly visited the Cavalry, demanding to meet Yuder Aile and causing quite a stir before leaving. When Ever and her colleagues reported the incident to Yuder, his response was memorable:

‘Don’t bother about that guy. Next time, just leave him be and let me know what he says.’

While the details of the past between Yuder and Sir Kiolle da Diarca were unknown, that reply had left a lasting impression.

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Chapter 738

‘Don’t bother about that guy. Next time, just leave him be and let me know what he says.’

While the details of the past between Yuder and Sir Kiolle da Diarca were unknown, that reply had left a lasting impression.

Ever turned her gaze away from Kiolle. Among the nobles near Duke Diarca and Kiolle, only one stood out: their target, Baron Renbow.

Ever scanned the surroundings, searching for the Eldore siblings and Revlin, but the trio was nowhere to be seen. Then, a faint whisper, as if someone was right beside her ear, reached her.

-Deputy Commander. We are not there but on the opposite side, near the watermill.-

Following Revlin’s voice, Ever’s eyes were drawn to a small ornamental stream beside the walkway by the lake and a pretty watermill beside it. Behind it, three children peeked out, noticing Ever’s gaze, and then quickly disappeared.

With a sense of relief, Ever spoke to Pruelle.

“They are over there by the watermill. Can you see them?”

“Ah… Yes. But, Miss Beck, could you perhaps put me down now…?”

Pruelle, still awkwardly held in Ever’s arms, murmured with a strained smile. Only then did Ever realize she was still holding him and was startled.

“Oh! I’m sorry, I forgot to put you down. Were you uncomfortable?”

“Not at all. Well, not that I meant you should keep holding me, but now that you have put me down, it’s fine. Yes, I’m quite alright.”

Though Pruelle’s usual ladylike demeanor slipped, fortunately, no one around them seemed to notice. Once on the ground, he took a few deep breaths and, feigning nonchalance, gestured to Ever.

“Let’s sit on that bench over there. I’ll pretend to feel dizzy, and you, Miss Beck, take out the parasol to shade us and pretend to wipe my face with a handkerchief to avoid attention.”

“Yes.”

They sat at a safe distance, keeping an eye on Duke Diarca’s party.

‘Baron Renbow keeps speaking to Duke Diarca, but the Duke’s party doesn’t seem too pleased. I heard Baron Renbow was part of the Duke’s noble faction… Could this not be a pre-arranged situation?’

She wished she could hear their conversation more clearly when, timely, Revlin’s voice reached her again.

-Deputy Commander. We can hear them better from our side. It seems like Duke Diarca’s party wasn’t expecting to encounter Baron Renbow here today. It could be an act from the Duke, but I don’t think so.-

“Why?”

Ever murmured, not expecting Revlin to hear and reply, but to her surprise, the answer came from nearby.

“Because there are no other nobles around Duke Diarca and Sir Kiolle.”

“I see, but what does that have to do with anything? Could it not be that they deliberately didn’t bring attendants to meet secretly?”

“Hmm… Miss Beck. Duke Diarca doesn’t need to take such precautions if he doesn’t want to. If he had intended to meet Baron Renbow, he could have done so more comfortably elsewhere than in the outskirts of the Fourth Wall District. The fact that he came here with only one of his sons, who isn’t even the eldest, and a minimal entourage, suggests that he might genuinely be here for personal relaxation. If other nobles were around, it might be different, but that doesn’t seem to be the case now.”

“Mmm…”

In other words, in the eyes of the nobility, if there was an intention to meet someone away from prying eyes, this place and situation wouldn’t have been chosen.

Baron Renbow continued to speak with a smile, but Duke Diarca’s expression remained cold. He looked utterly bored and barely glanced at Renbow.

It seemed that Kiolle, the Duke’s son, was more engaged in the conversation with Renbow, although not in a particularly friendly manner, but rather with a sense of caution.

‘I’m curious about what they’re discussing. If the sages’ party is nearby as I expect, where could they be hiding?’

Continuing to wait for intermittent updates from Revlin’s side didn’t seem efficient. Ever pondered for a moment before coming to a decision.

‘It’s not bad to watch from a hidden spot without arousing suspicion, but it might be better to move around. Even if it’s risky, we need a more detailed understanding of the enemies’ movements.’

It was a decision to increase the risk level, but Ever, assessing her and her comrades’ capabilities, thought it was a risk worth taking.

‘Had it been the old me, I wouldn’t have thought this way in such a situation. It’s quite astonishing, really.’

Training with the Cavalry had made Ever realize she was more daring than she had thought. Initially overwhelmed by the responsibility as a Deputy Commander, she now found the burden somewhat enjoyable. It felt like discovering a hidden talent within herself.

‘I remember wondering back when I first joined if I would ever face Kiolle of Diarca like Yuder did… Now, facing a great noble doesn’t scare me at all.’

She smiled subtly and then spoke up.

“Elle, would it be possible for you to transform again?”

Pruelle closed his eyes as if gauging his condition, then nodded.

“Yes, I can. You want to get closer to Duke Diarca’s side, right?”

“Yes. It’s risky, but it seems like the best option.”

“It’s okay. I was thinking the same. You’re asking because my ability is best suited for this, right? Just being acknowledged for that makes me feel really good.”

Pruelle scanned the surroundings and then grinned, a playful smile that seemed slightly out of character for a lady.

“We’ll need to move a bit. The lady will leave her escort behind for a while.”

Ever and Pruelle rose from the bench and entered a secluded path, unnoticed by others. Pruelle stepped behind a large tree and reemerged seconds later, transformed into a robust knight, identical in appearance to those guarding Duke Diarca.

“I borrowed the appearance of one of Duke Diarca’s knights who was controlling the area by the lake. He wasn’t near the Duke at the time, so he’s probably elsewhere now. It’s hard to maintain the appearance of someone I’ve only seen once for long, but since knights move around and keep watch, getting close for a short time shouldn’t arouse too much suspicion.”

“Understood. If there’s trouble, run right away. I’ll watch and support you.”

“That’s reassuring. Then, could you please look after Nipollen for a moment?”

Ever gently took the small cat, Nipollen, handed over by Pruelle. Thankfully, due to their previous interactions, Nipollen didnt resist staying in Evers embrace, even in such circumstances.

“I’ll be back soon.”

With a calm stride, Pruelle approached the area where Duke Diarca was. Ever watched him nervously.

As Pruelle neared Duke Diarca’s entourage, a servant trailing behind addressed him. While their words were inaudible, it was apparent from their demeanor that they were inquiring about something. Ever worried if Pruelles disguise had already been seen through.

‘If thats the case…’

Ever was ready to dash out, snatch Pruelle, and use her strength if needed. However, after a short while, she saw Pruelle casually finish her conversation with the servant and smoothly integrate herself among them. She slowly relaxed her tense muscles as she saw Pruelle casually turn his head and smile subtly. It was indeed a display of remarkable courage.

Just then, Revlin's voice unexpectedly reached her ears, sounding puzzled by their abrupt change of position.

-Deputy Commander? Where did you suddenly go? You're not in any danger, are you?-

To respond to them, Ever would need to approach the area near the watermill. Holding Nipollen close, she moved carefully to avoid drawing any suspicion from those around.

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Chapter 739

-Deputy Commander? Where did you suddenly go? You're not in any danger, are you?-

To respond to them, Ever would need to approach the area near the watermill. Holding Nipollen close, she moved carefully to avoid drawing any suspicion from those around.

Soon, three people rolling their eyes in confusion spotted Ever. Holding a cat, she paced like a guard waiting for her master and sent two short hand signals downwards.

The meaning was concise:

'No issues with the current situation.'

'Do not divert attention from the target and wait.'

Combined, these signals implied that the situation, with Ever present and Pruelle absent, was not a concern but intentional. Fortunately, the three astute individuals seemed to quickly grasp the meaning. Shortly after, Revlin responded.

-So, Brother Elle has transformed for the third time? Understood. I will wait.-

The boy, who had never affectionately addressed his own brothers as such, casually used this term of endearment for Pruelle, unrelated by blood.

Coming from similar backgrounds as nobles of ducal houses who turned their backs on their parents, it would have been more difficult for them not to grow close. However, the decisive factor in their

camaraderie was Revlin being the reason Pruelle first decided to cooperate with the Cavalry.

Their relationship transcended mere friendship, viewing each other as newly found brothers, understanding each other’s actions without words. Ever found this sight pleasing.

Meanwhile, Pruelle, transformed into a knight, was witnessing an inexplicable scene.

“Look here, Sir Kiolle. Do you not remember who I am? It’s me, Baron Renbow, whom you met just a few days ago! Isnt it normal for me to greet the Duke when I see him passing by?”

“Why should I recognize who you are, Baron? Weve already greeted each other; why do you keep insisting on talking to my father instead of me? Why did you keep beating around the bush?”

“When did I ever beat around the bush? I just have something personal to say to the Duke.”

Baron Renbow. And Kiolle da Diarca.

The two had been engaged in an unending verbal skirmish, even before Pruelle approached as a knight.

The reason was simple. Baron Renbow, while strolling in Fourth Wall District, had enBaronered Duke Diarca and approached to greet him, asking to have a private word with him.

Under normal circumstances, the Duke would have either acquiesced to the request, moving Kiolle aside, or quickly ended the enBaroner by refusing.

However, before Duke Diarca could speak, Kiolle, suddenly suspicious, reacted sharply, turning the situation into an unexpectedly prolonged confrontation. This was what a weary and

embarrassed servant, mistaking Pruelle for a knight who had come to intervene, explained.

“Ah, Sir Knight, no need to worry. It’s just the youngest master’s recent affliction flaring up again.”

“Affliction?”

“The symptom where the master suspects everyone around him could be a beast.”

“Ah…”

At first, it sounded absurd. But soon, it became clear that the servant’s words were accurate.

For reasons unknown, Kiolle seemed to be extremely wary of Baron Renbow, who had approached unannounced and persistently sought an audience with the Duke even after formal greetings. Like a small dog protecting its master, Kiolle stepped in, preventing Duke Diarca from even speaking to Baron Renbow. It appeared as though he suspected any conversation between Duke Diarca and Baron Renbow could lead to an attack.

Despite knowing Kiolle’s actions were motivated by concern for his father, his loud voice and childish demeanor did not come across as touching in the slightest.

And, in Pruelle’s eyes, it seemed Duke Diarca shared the same sentiment.

“…Kiolle. I too find this situation unpleasant, but raising your voice like this in public is not becoming of your dignity,” Duke Diarca chided with a click of his tongue. However, Kiolle, instead of heeding these words, became even more alarmed and turned to check on his father in a frenzy.

“What? Father, are you alright? You don’t feel a headache or… any strange sensations?!”

“I’ve told you several times, I’m fine…”

“Father! Didn’t you promise that you would not disregard my concerns for a while, appreciating my worry for you? How can you break your promise so soon? You said you would walk by the lake with only me today!”

“Kiolle, Kiolle… Do you realize how many days have passed since that ‘for a while’? It’s been several weeks already.”

Several weeks would be more than enough time for anyone to consider the term ‘for a while’ to have been fulfilled. Yet, Kiolle shook his head firmly.

“Still, a promise is a promise! I find this situation extremely suspicious. What could be so urgent that it must be said to my father in my absence? If you won’t answer, it surely must be some dishonorable affair, right? As a proud Diarca Imperial Knight, I will not stand idly by in such a crisis…”

“Wait a minute, a dishonorable affair? Such impudent and exaggerated accusations are intolerable!”

Baron Renbow, incredulous, raised his voice in protest. Pruelle fully understood his astonishment.

‘The fact that he insists on speaking with Duke Diarca despite having already greeted him must mean, as His Majesty the Emperor speculated, that he’s harboring the escaped sage. It seems Duke Diarca has been maintaining a careful distance from both the sage and Baron Renbow, ready to sever ties at any moment.’

If Duke Diarca had intended to protect the escaped sage, he would have found him by now. Baron Renbow and the sage might

hope for Duke Diarca's power to shield them, but from the Duke's perspective, there's no reason to unconditionally protect someone who's caused trouble and is on the run. That's why Baron Renbow's approach was evident.

'Such a foolish move. For someone like Duke Diarca, the likelihood of entertaining such sudden requests is extremely low…'

Raised by a gambling-addicted, arrogant, and overbearing Duke who considered everyone, including family, beneath him, Pruelle had become adept at predicting the thoughts of such high nobility.

The leaders of the four great ducal houses were not just heads of their families. They stood atop a colossal noble force that had maintained its position for a millennium. They were individuals who had lived without concern for others' opinions or fear of exposing their weaknesses.

Duke Diarca, who had delivered the final blow to the weakened imperial authority over a long period by snatching the position of the Crown Prince, securing his place as the victor of the next era, would not be short of arrogance - if anything, his pride would only be greater.

I had felt it even when I saw him at the last party. Though he seems to hide it well in public, the attitude he revealed when provoked by Yuder seemed no less than that of my father.

However, Pruelle found it somewhat surprising that such a man was tolerating, albeit with an annoyed expression, the stubbornness of her youngest son. It was said that Duke Diarca, despite finding her youngest son's lack of talent pitiable as he grew older, still found him endearing enough to arrange a position for him in the Imperial Knight.

"So what is it then? Why bother coming all the way here under the pretense of a greeting? What exactly are you trying to say?"

“Why should I explain that to Sir Kiolle? Ah, of course, I am truly sorry for interrupting your precious father-son time, but…”

“If you don’t speak, I will suspect your intentions and challenge you to a duel.”

“A duel? Sir Kiolle? Really, why are you acting like this? Didn’t you see me at His Highness the Crown Prince’s palace before! I really don’t understand why you doubt my intentions so much!”

“That’s exactly why I find it more suspicious! Ugh!”

Kiolle finally removed his glove and threw it down.

“Young master…!”

The servants guarding the surroundings all tightly shut their eyes. Duke Diarca also held his head.

“Kiolle. Do you really have to persist in this…”

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Chapter 740

“Kiolle. Do you really have to persist in this…”

“Sir Kiolle, what is the meaning of this…! How can a knight of the Imperial Knight Palace Guard dare challenge me, someone who is not a knight, to a duel!”

“Is that so? Then hurry up and tell me. For someone so close to those who ran away from the Bright Palace and never returned, what is your true intention for appearing at such a time?”

“I have been saying there’s no hidden intention whatsoever!”

Baron Renbow’s outcry, a mix of incredulity, fear, and indescribable emotions, was met with a growling Kiolle, who turned his head and pointed at a servant standing beside Pruelle.

“You there! Where is the sword I entrusted to you earlier? Bring it to me at once! I shall protect my father from this liar!”

“My lord. The eyes of the public are upon us. Please calm yourself! You surely do not intend to actually propose a duel? I cannot bring you the sword!”

“There’s no law for this in the world. It’s an overreaction to just ask for a conversation with Duke Diarca, don’t you think!”

The scene was one of unparalleled chaos.

However, Pruelle, observing everything with a cool detachment, thought differently from the rest.

‘It seems that Kiolle Diarca’s intention is less about dueling and more about provoking Baron Renbow to gauge his reaction.’

If one truly intended to duel, they would not cause such a scene; rather, they would simply bring two weapons, declare a duel ‘under the eyes of god and the sword,’ and seek agreement.

Noble duels usually involve three witnesses for fairness, and if one were serious, they could easily request any passing noble to oblige. However, after declaring his intent to duel, Kiolle only caused a ruckus, never taking the necessary steps for an actual duel.

The difference between merely threatening an action and actually carrying it out was evident.

Pruelle couldn’t help but think Kiolle was well aware of this distinction and was deliberately causing this commotion.

‘I thought he was just recklessly causing trouble, but perhaps not.’

Until now, Pruelle had judged Kiolle as ‘the youngest of the Diarca family, inept and arrogantly indulging in knightly fantasies,’ as per the public rumors. Yet, there are others like Duke Peletta Kishiar La Orr, who, despite being more harshly judged than Kiolle, are in fact, meticulous and patient, adept at concealing their strength.

‘The mention of the Bright Palace earlier was also suspicious. Kiolle, even as the Crown Prince’s guard, seemed hostile towards the sage’s party from the beginning. Hmm. If he’s come to such a conclusion independently, not swayed by his family, that’s impressive. And contrary to rumors, he isn’t as brash in speech.’

Having met Kishiar first and shattering his prejudices, Pruelle mistakenly thought he couldn’t take Kiolle lightly. Not knowing why Kiolle couldn’t clearly propose a duel or properly insult his opponent, it was an unavoidable judgment.

Then, Kiolle raised his voice again.

“Very well. Let me be more direct! Baron Renbow!”

As Baron Renbow flinched in surprise, Kiolle boldly continued.

“Baron Renbow, do you have any idea how many times I have seen you and the ignorant commoners of the Bright Palace conspiring together?”

“What, what?”

“I know that you, Baron Renbow behaved as if you were a subordinate to those commoners, repeatedly leaving and returning from the outside to aid them! I have counted the number of times you sneaked into the palace to meet someone without even seeing His Highness the Crown Prince, which is six times! Even after those people disappeared, didn’t you come to the palace once, cunningly choosing a time when I was not on duty?”

“What are you saying right now! When have I ever…”

“Isn’t it deliberate that you encountered us as we wandered alone without even a servant? Did you not inquire when my father would be alone at the estate?”

Such an outburst could only be described as the height of paranoia.

However, Baron Renbow was genuinely startled by these words. He was so taken aback that, unlike before, he couldn’t protest vehemently, his eyes wide as a rabbit’s, quickly glancing around as if searching for someone.

Although brief, Pruelle, who had been closely observing, clearly saw this reaction. Even Duke Diarca, who had been distressed by his son’s commotion, suddenly narrowed his eyes and twisted his thin lips. His gaze turned into that of a predator intently observing Baron Renbow.

“…Hmm.”

Ironically, the only one who failed to notice Baron Renbow’s reaction amidst this situation was Kiolle, who was heatedly involved in the moment.

“Even in this situation, do you claim to be innocent? I, Kiolle Diarca, have personally observed these events! If you dare say I am wrong, then speak up! Deny that you have betrayed your loyalty and become a subordinate to the commoners!”

Kiolle shouted, puffing out his chest with passion, sweat beading on his forehead from the intensity.

Baron Renbow, without blinking, stammered and gasped for breath. The people thought he was so shocked by Kiolle’s tremendous insult that he had lost his ability to speak.

However, his reaction was slightly different from everyone’s expectations.

Baron Renbow, who had been repeatedly opening and closing his mouth as if to say something, suddenly clutched his hair and twisted violently.

“Ch-choking!”

“Baron Renbow?!”

Duke Diarca’s servant shouted in panic. But Baron Renbow, beyond comprehension, doubled over and collapsed to the ground.

“Baron Renbow has collapsed!”

“Don’t panic! It might be an act! Confirm thoroughly!”

Kiolle, more panicked than anyone, stuttered unattractively. Pruelle quietly blended in with the servants and approached the

fallen Baron Renbow. He was convulsing in pain, repeatedly muttering like a broken object.

“I, I must… the sage… the sage asked me to…”

“What? What are you saying? Come to your senses, Lord!”

As the servants shook him, Baron Renbow’s eyes fluttered open. He desperately appealed to Duke Diarca, who was looking down from a distance. His fixed, unblinking eyes sent a chill through everyone.

“Th-the sage… meet the sage, please, Your Grace. He… he desperately needs your help… I was only for Your Grace… no, His Highness the Crown Prince… no…”

“Look, look at these strange words and behavior! Baron Renbow’s condition is not normal! Didn’t I say something was suspicious!”

As Kiolle spoke hesitantly yet loudly, the servants could not help but acknowledge that the youngest lord’s suspicions were not entirely unfounded. They exchanged glances, realizing something was truly amiss with Baron Renbow. Even as he convulsed, his neck and eyes, which remained fixed on Duke Diarca, did not move, an eerie sight as if he were under some curse.

Pruelle, having been briefed before the mission about the sage and his party’s abilities, reached a different conclusion.

The sage was said to be a brainwashing expert. Is this the effect of brainwashing?

Just moments ago, Baron Renbow, who had seemed perfectly ordinary, had suddenly collapsed in a state of confusion. While it was unclear why he had exhibited such a reaction, it seemed evident that

he was under some form of mind control, and the power exerted on him had abruptly triggered a change.

Duke Diarca, who had been observing Baron Renbow calmly and quietly, finally spoke.

“How strange, Baron Renbow. When I first met you, you did not seem like someone lacking in manners. I had always respected your cautious and careful nature… What could have caused such a change in you?”

“No, no… I, I, I am… Ughh!”

It was then that a sudden commotion erupted not far away.

A loud crashing sound, as if a tree were being felled, followed by a sharp scream, pierced the air.

“Ah!”

Everyone reflexively turned their heads toward the sound.

A woman, waving her gloved hand threateningly, was attacking someone who was rolling to avoid her.

While others might not have recognized her, Pruelle immediately knew who she was.

‘Deputy Commander Ever…!’

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Chapter 741

In the midst of tension, an unexpected event occurred to Ever as she watched over Pruelle. It was just before Baron Renbow began showing unusual phenomena.

“Huh? Nipollen? What’s wrong?”

Nipollen, who had been quietly nestled in Ever’s arms, suddenly perked up his ears and lifted his head. He repeatedly narrowed and then dilated his pupils as he stared intently at something, his small nose pointing upwards. Finally, he opened his mouth and let out a soft cry.

It was unusual for Nipollen to speak unless prompted by his brother. Concerned he might be in pain, Ever was genuinely startled.

“Nipollen? Oh no…!”

Just as Ever was about to comfort the little cat, Nipollen fluidly slipped out of her embrace and leaped away, evading Ever’s grasp with unexpected speed.

‘Oh dear!’

This was an emergency. With Pruelle unable to come to their aid, Ever hadn’t expected such a situation. She heard a whooshing sound and felt a gust of wind as she chased after the fleeing cat.

“Ever! What’s going on?”

Appearing with the wind was Hinn Eldore. Utilizing the ability of the siblings to teleport others when at least one of them was present, Finn had sent Hinn.

Ever quickly surveyed her surroundings. The few people around were all distracted by the exciting chaos caused by Kiolle Da Diarca, paying no attention to anything else. No one noticed Hinn's sudden appearance beside Ever, given his small stature.

Ever hastily explained the situation.

"Nipollen suddenly ran away! We must find him."

"Nipollen? Did he flee out of fear, or was it something else?"

Hinn asked, keeping pace with Ever without losing her breath.

"It didn't seem like fear! He just suddenly took off after looking somewhere."

"How odd. Did he spot someone familiar, perhaps?"

"I wish that were the case… Ah, he seemed to go that way, but where did he go?"

It was difficult to track the small kitten, especially as he blended into the underbrush. Just when Ever was about to pause in confusion, a tree's shadow among them suddenly undulated and morphed into a human shape.

The shadow, without rising, pointed in a direction. Hinn exclaimed with joy.

"It's Gakane's shadow clone!"

"Over there, let's go!"

Grateful for Gakane's timely assistance, Ever hurried in the direction the shadow indicated. Nipollen was not far, near a secluded, shadowy spot by the lake.

"Nipollen!"

Ever was about to embrace the cat in relief but then hesitated.

Nipollen sat in front of a large tree, as if facing an impassable door, looking at something. What could he be staring at in the seemingly empty space?

Nipollen turned to Ever, flicking his tail. Ever watched, feeling a strange sense of foreboding.

This… feels…

“We’ve come a bit off track, but we’re not far from where we were, right? Look, there’s Diarca acting foolish over there. Anyway, now that we’ve found Nipollen, we should head back!”

“Just a moment, Hinn.”

“Yes?”

“Do you remember Nipollen’s second power?”

“The one besides transforming? Of course, I remember.”

Nipollen, who could transform into a cat from his childhood, had more abilities than just this transformation. This young boy also possessed another ability: he could discern Awakener from non-Awakener with uncanny accuracy.

This second ability usually didn’t stand out much in the Cavalry, where most were Awakeners. However, it became quite noticeable when non-Awakener guests or mages visited.

Like all Awakeners, Nipollen’s abilities had evolved slightly during his time with the Cavalry. Ever recalled a conversation with Pruelle, who had recently spoken of his younger sibling with great delight.

“Nippy’s abilities seem to extend beyond just distinguishing between the Awakeners and non-Awakeners and feeling comfortable

around the Awakeners. Lately, it appears he can even detect invisible powers. Isn't that remarkable?"

Ever had heard that Nipollen had once suddenly disappeared, only to be found observing Kanna, who was using her powers in a room.

The extent of Nipollen's perception wasn't fully understood, as communicating with him was difficult, but Pruelle saw this as a positive development.

He's always been sensitive since he was young. If he becomes more attuned to sensory perception, maybe he could be more comfortable even when not in his cat form

Ever gazed thoughtfully at Nipollen and asked,

"Nipollen. Is there something there?"

"…Ever. Do you think Nipollen came here because of his second power?"

"I'm not sure. But I heard something from Elle recently."

"Hmm"

At this, Hinn's expression subtly changed.

After a moment, Nipollen, who had been slowly moving his tail, turned to Ever and opened his mouth, emitting a squeak more than a meow.

As Nipollen suddenly stood up on his hind legs and scraped at the ground, Ever reached out, and Hinn's fist, which had swiftly grown, surged toward the large tree in front of the cat.

Had there been nothing there, it would have been a simple strike shattering a tree.

But just before the attack landed, Ever felt a strange sensation, as if the area around the tree was trembling.

Thud!

“Damn it. How could this!”

From the air that felt solid as a thick wall breaking, someone who had been invisible until that moment appeared, looking astonished.

Three people stood protectively, with a middle-aged man in a pilgrim’s robe standing behind them.

‘Found it. This was the place.’

Pruelle’s words were proven true. What they had failed to find all this time, the small Nipollen had easily discovered. Communication might be difficult, but his place as a member of the Cavalry was undeniable.

Seeing Nipollen, who had just evaded the attack and fled to a nearby tree, Ever smiled, feeling a thrilling and wild sensation surge within.

“You must be the Sage and his companions, right? We’ve been looking for you. I’m pleased to finally meet you.”

“Could it be the Cavalry?”

“Yes. Last time you managed to elude our members, but not today. We’re aware of your crimes and the circumstances. Please come with us peacefully.”

“Sage! We must escape!”

Of course, Ever didn’t expect them to come along quietly. After a rough shout, a member of the Star of Nagran swung a dagger at her with great force. An unknown power emanated from the dagger,

swiftly enveloping both the man and Ever, forming a semicircular space.

Ever dodged the man's attack and tried to break through the semicircular space, but it felt as if she were trapped behind a solid wall. Like the invisible shield that had been around the tree, it seemed that this man's ability was to create a space that could trap and conceal something.

'This is a bit troublesome.'

"Just trapped one, now escape while you can! I'll handle this woman! There's only a little kid left anyway!"

The man, who was shouting fervently, suddenly stopped mid-sentence as he saw something growing rapidly not far away.

"Uh-huh~ Just a little kid, right. But I'm not just any kid, what now?"

Hinn, with everything but his face grotesquely swollen, laughed gleefully. His eyes, like those of a predator, looked down upon the Awakeners of the Star of Nagran.

Stunned by this bizarre and unbelievable sight, they blinked dumbly, then screamed in terror.

Seizing the moment, Ever commanded Hinn.

"Hinn! Take care of them while I break out of here!"

"Okay!"

Ever focused her energy into her fingertips, assuming a ready stance. The power that enveloped her gloves, like a thin shield, was ideal for piercing, as hard as solid metal.

Anyone who underestimated her as just a woman would be swiftly subdued by the fearsome power at her fingertips, unable to mount a proper defense.

‘I wasn’t appointed Deputy Commander for nothing.’

Even among the Awakeners, one shouldn’t judge by appearances alone, a fact they should have well known. Encountering such a fool who still made such judgments ignited her fighting spirit.

With a cold smile, Ever took a heavy step forward and then extended her hand. The man, reflexively swinging his dagger to block, watched his blade crack soundlessly upon impact and then saw Ever’s slender finger approaching his face.

“What the…!”

Before he could finish his sentence, a tremendous explosion rang out. The sound, created by the collision of their bodies, was unbelievably loud for such an encounter.

It took Ever just a few minutes to break through the wall and emerge.

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Chapter 742

Until this moment, everything had been proceeding smoothly, Yuder mused, his eyes lowered as he read about Ever’s quick and appropriate decision to subdue the Star of Nagran.

Ever’s opponent, an Awakener with the ability to create invisible spaces, used this power for both protection and imprisonment. It seemed beyond doubt that this same individual had played a key role in isolating the disturbance at the Sun Palace from the outside world during the intrusion.

Despite adeptly wielding his power, the enemy had a weakness. If the user himself was attacked and rendered combat-incapable, the space he created became unsustainable.

Ever, understanding this flaw perfectly, had effectively thrashed her adversary. She was the best in the Cavalry with the ability to control her power so precisely that she was able to attack just enough to destroy weapons but not destroy the human body.

While Ever was dealing with him, Hinn was not idle. She single-handedly held her own against three others and nearly captured the sage just as Ever was emerging.

The hindrance to both Ever and Hinn was the seemingly weak sage, who alone appeared incapable of striking down a single person.

Yuder swiftly skimmed the following passage:

”*Just before I emerge, the sage fled towards the Duke of Diarca with only one Awakener. Although we attempted to follow, those we thought we had subdued rose again, ignoring their injuries and*

relentlessly pursuing us. Even after being struck down repeatedly, they disregarded their own bodies and charged madly."

The Awakeners guarding the sage, despite broken bones and regaining consciousness from unconsciousness, relentlessly charged at Ever and Hinn. The letter suggested that their insensitivity to pain only added to their surprise.

The enemies, screaming in excruciating pain with each defeat, yet rising again to engage in a frenzied attack. The situation was vividly portrayed in the letter.

"Brainwashing truly creates troublesome foes," murmured Kishiar, gazing in the same direction as Yuder. Yuder nodded slightly and spoke.

"It would have been easier to subdue mindless enemies. But in a situation where the priority is to overpower without killing, fighting such adversaries is challenging, even for the more experienced."

"Indeed. What would my assistant have done in that situation?"

"If I were there…" Yuder pondered his response.

"I would have immediately sealed the area to prevent them from escaping their shield as soon as Nipollen located the enemy."

If they had created an invisible space for protection, Yuder would have countered with a greater force, sealing the outside to block any escape route. This method, only possible with Yuder's incomparably great and overwhelming power, was also the quickest.

Kishiar laughed silently at Yuder's response.

"A tactic of advancing the general's badge to its limit for encirclement and capture. Truly my assistants approach."

This was a metaphor drawn from a strategy game they had played together.

Though Yuder wasn't there with his comrades at that time, they had once again found a way to overcome the situation. It was Gakane who had appeared just in time to assist Ever and Hinn, caught in a tight spot.

"Gakane!"

"Sorry, Ever. I intended to help covertly as instructed, but it seemed unnecessary in this situation. Let Hinn and me handle this. Go after the sage!"

Thanks to Gakane, Ever could leave the battle against the brainwashed Awakeners to him and Hinn, and pursue the sage.

However, this time, the last one by the sage's side hindered Ever. A diminutive man with a timid appearance and a long scar on one ear, he was a Diemon capable of duplicating others' abilities in a degraded form.

Why doesn't this forest seem to end? It's near the Duke of Diarca's spot, isn't it? It feels too long, even considering my pace…!

Ever slowed down, scanning the surroundings sharply.

No people in sight. No traces either. That means… a mental power?

Ever recalled that she had once made eye contact with the man who fled with the sage. He had sunburnt skin and a torn scar on one ear. It was since that encounter that she had lost sight of them, and the path seemed to repeat itself.

If this is a mental power, running blindly is futile. I must break out from within.

Ever coolly recalled the mental power counter-training from the Cavalry. The most effective method in such a scenario was to find a weak spot from inside and break through.

But where to break through? The surroundings looked no different from an ordinary lakeside walk, making it hard to pinpoint.

As Ever cautiously surveyed the area, a rustling sound startled him, and she turned, fists clenched.

“…Nipollen?!”

But it wasn’t an enemy that appeared, rather a small cat. Ever’s heart settled as she saw Nipollen jump down from a branch.

Lucky I didn’t attack first.

Ever wasn’t sure why Nipollen was here, but she might be better at finding a way out of this situation.

“Nipollen, do you know the way out of here?”

The cat just stood there, making it unclear whether it understood or not. Ever changed her approach.

“Elle… Hmm. Shall we go back to see your brother?”

At that, the kitten meowed softly and started running in a certain direction. Ever followed without hesitation.

As they ran, the scenery began to warp, revealing a distorted gap between the trees, like a misaligned puzzle. Without hesitation, Ever gathered strength in her hand and lunged towards it.

Feeling something catch in her hand, she pulled back and struck again. The world crumbled with a thud, and it seemed like the trees were breaking.

On the third strike, she saw a blurry shadow, resembling a person fleeing from her. Instinctively, Ever knew it was her target and continued her assault.

Boom, thud. The sound of the world breaking grew until finally reaching its limit.

Thud!

Everything shattered, and the world around Ever changed color in an instant. She closed and opened her eyes, feeling the fragments of an unknown illusion flow chaotically.

“Aaargh!”

With someones tearing scream, Ever finally escaped back to reality.

The first thing she saw was the shattered tree brushed by her hand, and the man who had locked eyes with Ever earlier. The man, bleeding from the mouth, writhed in pain and quickly averted his gaze upon seeing Ever.

Ever caught the man’s murmuring as he wiped away the blood.

“As expected, that Nahan’s ability, isn’t strong at all… If it weren’t for the sage’s command, I would’ve maintained my previous power instead of using this weak one… Ah, what a waste… Such a waste…”

‘Nahan? Did he just say he used Nahan’s power?’

Ever, having heard from Kanna about the abilities of those who remained with the sage, easily deduced the man’s power.

‘It was said that there is one who could mimic others’ abilities in a degraded form. So, he copied Nahan’s power to create a repeating

illusionary path, buying time for the sage to escape…!'

It was strange that the illusion, indistinguishable from reality, was broken so easily. If he had been the real Nahan, it wouldn't have ended so simply.

Realizing the sage was not with the man, Ever bit her lip and turned his head. During the illusion, she had unwittingly reached near the lakeside where the Duke of Diarca's people were.

Everyone was looking at Ever and the man sprawling in front of her with surprise. Among them, Ever noticed an unfamiliar knight looking at her with the most shocked and worried expression.

'Luckily, Pruelle hasn't been discovered yet. Not much time has passed.'

However, the plan to capture the sage's party without revealing themselves had collapsed. As Ever felt a faint sense of disappointment, someone emerged from the opposite bushes and prostrated before the Duke of Diarca.

"I, Ajihen Toom, humbly present myself before His Highness the Duke of Diarca."

He was the sage, revealing his face after removing the pilgrim's robe.

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Chapter 743

“I, Ajihen Toom, humbly present myself before His Highness the Duke of Diarca.”

He was the sage, revealing his face after removing the pilgrim’s robe.

There was a prolonged silence as everyone was rendered speechless, each astonished for various reasons.

The situation was tense, especially since the sage had now directly approached Duke Diarca. Unable to move immediately, Ever and Pruelle, along with the other hidden members near the waterwheel, exchanged brief, intense glances.

The sage, with a respectful yet detached tone, broke the silence. “Your Grace, I apologize for disturbing your rest. Although these circumstances are alarming, I swear by the god who oversees only the truth, the events of today are neither the fault of this man nor the pitiable citizens of our empire. Your merciful Grace, may I request your ear for our story?”

“Woah, they said he is a master of brainwashing, but his tongue is truly something else. Could probably tie a ribbon or even skip rope with it!” Finn, hiding behind the waterwheel, couldn’t hide his incredulous amusement. Revlin, similarly amused, tried to suppress his laughter upon hearing Finn’s comment.

Unaware of the boys’ exchange, the sage remained kneeling, awaiting Duke Diarca’s response. Onlookers alternated their gaze between the sage, who bore a kind and truthful demeanor, and Ever, who had just made a dramatic entrance by happily smashing people and trees alike.

What on earth is going on?

How can a woman wave her hand and shatter a tree? This is terrifying. She must be no ordinary person. Definitely an Awakener!

An Awakener in the capital… Could it be the Cavalry?

Ever, out of uniform, became the subject of the crowd's speculation. They debated whether she belonged to the Cavalry or not, arguing that if she did, the Cavalry should be held responsible for the violence and destruction in the Fourth Wall District.

Duke Diarca, in his own way, silently observed the scene from behind Kiolle. The shrewd Duke's thoughts were inscrutable to everyone, even the quick-witted Pruelle.

Seeing the hostile and wary gazes directed at Ever, Pruelle clenched his fists. Regardless of what anyone said, Ever maintained a stoic expression, but it was hard for Pruelle to do the same.

Even when his father had announced he would do something despicable, he could laugh it off, but now he was too angry and upset to maintain his transformed state.

Deciding it was best to retreat and return to his original form, he carefully began to move away. However, before Pruelle could move, someone stepped forward, and a roar of furious outburst followed.

"How dare you spout such nonsense!"

"…Huh?"

"What?"

"…Yes?"

The one who had shouted and clenched his fist was none other than Kiolle da Diarca.

The murmuring nobles were stunned, gaping at him in disbelief. The nearby Knights were equally shocked.

“What’s this? Has he finally lost his mind?”

Finn squinted his eyes and circled his temple with his finger, implying insanity. Revlin’s wide-eyed, bewildered expression mirrored the sentiment.

The sage, too, seemed startled and rarely blinked his eyes several times before reopening his mouth.

“Sir Diarca? Whom, perchance, are you referring to”

Shut up, you cunning wretch! How dare you call my name without knowing me well! Do you expect me to just watch you spouting nonsense and disrupting the atmosphere as soon as you arrive!

“I am not, Sir Diarca but rather to His Grace, Duke Diarca”

Before the sage could finish his sentence, Kiolle mercilessly cut him off.

“Quiet! I forbade you to speak my father’s and my name with that mouth!”

Kiolle stomped his feet in a fit of rage, almost as if trying to prevent the sage’s words from reaching his father in a mischievous manner.

“No. I, Di”

“Father! It seems today is not a day for rest. Why bother with these strange individuals who keep appearing? Let’s return!”

“Di”

“Aaargh!”

What exactly was Kiolle da Diarca trying to do? His behavior seemed maddeningly suspicious, but on the other hand, the earlier peculiar behavior of Baron Renbow made it difficult to dismiss Kiolle's actions as merely bizarre.

Did Kiolle know something about this situation? People were extremely confused.

It became clear that Kiolle wasn't shouting at the surrounding nobles, but they, gripped by unease, closed their mouths and just rolled their eyes quietly. Thanks to Kiolle's ability to attract attention, Pruelle also quietly retreated and returned to his original form.

'Kiolle da Diarca truly an unpredictable character. I'm not sure what he intends, but perhaps he is similar to me or Revlin. I mustn't judge people solely by rumors in the future.'

As Duke Diaca was about to speak, Kiolle continued to angrily admonish the sage, telling him not to dare look up with those cunning eyes, or to shut his mouth.

"Kiolle. What are you doing? In a situation where strange things are happening, if someone comes forward to speak about it, shouldnt we at least listen? Especially since the Deputy Commander of the Cavalry, not in uniform, was seen harming someone in broad daylight.

Duke Diarca's thinly veiled gaze swept over Ever's face. He remembered Ever's face from a party they had attended recently.

It was Ever who was exposed, but it was Kiolle who turned pale at the mention of the Cavalry. He tried to persuade his father in a very loud voice.

"Father. I don't know who that woman is, but I think he's more suspicious than Baron Renbow! I'm convinced that you will be in

danger if you converse with him! So please don’t go near or talk to him! Ah, perhaps your condition is already”

“Kiolle.”

With just his name, the Duke quieted his son and then squinted his eyes while looking at Kiolle’s pestering face.

“You seem to have discovered something while observing Baron Renbow. Is that right?”

Kiolle’s eyes twitched for a moment. His arrogant face appeared to others as if hiding a deep scheme, but in reality, no one there correctly sensed that this was not the case.

“Are you causing a commotion because this is something you cannot discuss here?”

“That That is.”

“Duke Diarca, Your Grace, what a place to meet you.”

At the moment Kiolle barely managed to open his mouth, a soft voice cut through the air, drawing everyone’s attention. The people turned to see a face that had been the talk of the town for the past few months.

“That’s definitely Revlin Shand Apeto, the third son of Apeto who joined the Cavalry”

“And the red-haired one standing in front? Where have I seen that face before? Who was it?”

Duke Diarca’s gaze, however, was not on Revlin but on the young man with red hair standing at the front.

“Seeing the first son of Tain here is quite a surprise.”

“Ha ha, yes. Now that I’m a full-fledged member of the Cavalry, there’s no place I shouldn’t be.”

With those words, people realized that the youth before them was indeed the first son of Tain, a figure who had scarcely shown his face in social circles.

Unlike Revlin, Pruelle’s face was not well-known to the people, and that remained true even now, during the ongoing trial of his father, Duke Tain. While Revlin had become a temporary member of the Cavalry amidst a noisy scandal, Pruelle had joined more quietly, seeking to protect Nipollen and to live away from the shadow of his family’s name.

Although his identity became somewhat known when he attended a party at the palace recently with his sister, there were still not many who could recognize his face at a glance.

‘Perhaps that will change after today.’

Pruelle didn’t mind it. Despite having an ordinary appearance compared to the doll-like beauty of Revlin, his unignorable gaze and smile as he spoke betrayed his distinctive presence.

“I recently visited the Tain family’s villa in Fourth Wall District with my fellow Cavalry members, including the Deputy Commander, and would you believe it, the very criminals who caused the recent explosion in the capital appeared here? As these are individuals we must capture to ensure the safety of the capital, we’ve come all the way here. If it’s alright, may we take that person kneeling over there into our custody?”

Despite being in the same Cavalry, the background of being a scion of one of the four great duke families held significant power in such places. Pruelle felt this effect more acutely and overwhelmingly now than ever before.

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Chapter 744

The nobles, having heard Pruelle's words, suddenly became aware of the identity of the man Ever had knocked down, in addition to the kneeling sage in front of Duke Diarca.

"Those men… were they the culprits behind the recent explosion incident?"

The man still trampled under Ever's feet, Diemon, with his dusky, southern mixed-race complexion and unappealing features, could be considered as such. However, the well-cultured and warm-looking sage did not seem the type to cause such accidents. Moreover, wasn't this sage associated with Baron Renbow, a nobleman?

Yet Pruelle, who nearly became a Duke, did not seem to be lying. More precisely, his status lent an immediate credibility to his words.

As the expressions of those who valued appearances and status over truth began to shift, Duke Diarca spoke up.

"Why ask me about taking them away?"

"I thought all the culprits here, including Baron Renbow, who lies unconscious, came to see Your Grace, Duke Diarca. Since you seemed to be in conversation, I thought it proper to ask for permission. If I have overstepped, I apologize."

"I was merely walking with my son; I had no appointments with anyone. Why Baron Renbow and this man blocked our path, I am also unaware."

"What an insolent act by them. It must have been unpleasant for you. So, Your Grace, you met this man for the first time today?"

Pruelle’s naive question was met with Duke Diarca’s brief silence. He narrowed his eyes at Pruelle while stroking his beard, not even glancing at the kneeling sage before responding.

“Let’s see… I meet so many people that I don’t remember when I first met each one. Do you think I should recognize everyone who wishes to meet me?”

Suddenly, the sage’s shoulders tensed. He cautiously called out to Duke Diarca.

“Duke Diarca Your… “

“Who is interrupting me? I did not give permission to speak.”

Before Kiolle could shout to silence him, Duke Diarca cut him off with a chilling voice that instilled fear even without raising his voice. The sage’s complexion changed at the sound.

Duke Diarca, more effectively and quickly than Kiolle’s uproar, silenced the sage and then spoke nonchalantly to Pruelle.

“I dislike prolonged disturbances. Speak your mind, if you have something to say.”

“Understood. I realize Your Grace must be busy. However, something does seem odd.”

“What might that be?”

After a quick glance at the frozen sage, Pruelle smiled slightly and replied.

“According to our investigation while pursuing the culprits, these men entered the Imperial Palace several times as healers with permissions to the Bright Palace… Isn’t it strange, Your Grace, that you do not recall them?”

“…”

“Ah, and I have already confirmed through entrance records that Baron Durmand and Baron Renbow vouched for their identities, so you need not doubt that fact.”

Ever, unfamiliar with the underlying tensions in the nobles’ words, had simply recorded the conversation as she heard it. However, for Yuder and Kishiar, who were reading it, the dangerous undertones of that moment were crystal clear.

To summarize, Pruelle first circumspectly inquired if Duke Diarca had any connection to the perpetrators of the explosion incident. Duke Diarca casually denied any relation to the sage, intending to dismiss the matter. Pruelle then immediately pointed out the contradiction and falsehood in Duke Diarca’s response by revealing the sage’s identity.

Duke Diarca’s side, believing the Cavalry would be unaware of the sage’s identity, must have been quite surprised. Pruelle’s clever maneuvering, based on his keen understanding of Duke Diarca’s tendency to give vague answers and pretend disassociation, was truly remarkable.

However, Duke Diarca, cunning as an old raccoon, did not show any sign of discomfiture at this single attack.

Unperturbed by the murmuring of the nobles shocked by the revelation that the culprits of the capital’s explosion were actually the Crown Prince’s healers, Duke Diarca replied with a calm demeanor.

“I said I do not remember everyone, not that I didn’t know. Now that you mention it, I recall Baron Durmand expressing concern that the Crown Prince seemed a bit weakened after an injury, and out of loyal devotion, wanted to send skilled healers. However, being a man of faith, how could I have been pleased with that? Though I granted them entry, it was against my will. The last I heard was that

Baron Durmand, having recently retired to the countryside, passed this matter to Baron Renbow, with whom he had a close relationship.”

After saying this, Duke Diarca looked down at the still unconscious Baron Renbow with a feigned expression of concern.

“To think that ordinary healers are actually Awakeners, and nearly caused a disturbance in the capital’s security… It would be truly regrettable if true.”

Indeed, Duke Diarca had not definitively denied seeing the sage when asked. He had arrogantly countered whether he needed to remember every person he met.

Everyone knew it was improbable that Duke Diarca would ignore someone as significant as a healer frequenting the Crown Prince’s palace. However, what mattered was that his explanation did not directly contradict itself. The nobles, in the face of Duke Diarca’s calm denial, collectively remained silent.

“Understood. Then it’s alright if we take these individuals away?”

“That’s why I asked why you’re asking me in the first place. If they are indeed the culprits, then just take them. I heard the Cavalry was fortunately nearby when the explosion happened and managed to conclude it without harm, but it seems they let the culprits casually walk around the capital. I understand your concern that this might come to light… But your Commander is Duke Peletta, not Diarca, haha.”

Duke Diarca spoke with a tone that seemed to jest, yet wielded words like a hidden blade.

He subtly emphasized the ‘fortunate’ presence of the Cavalry near the incident, making others suspiciously question that coincidence. Instead of directly denying his connection with the

sage, he shifted the focus onto Kishiar and Pruelle. With his smooth rhetoric, he made them the butt of the joke. Pruelle, even he, was lost for words at his natural deflection.

‘Sly as they say… The nickname ‘old raccoon’ isn’t for naught. But let’s not get entangled. As long as he has denied the connection with the sage, taking him away fulfills our objective.’

Upon the revelation that the sage had been in the Crown Prince’s palace as a healer, Pruelle had expected that Duke Diarca would concoct some reason to prevent them from taking the sage away, especially to conceal any deeper connections. However, judging by Duke Diarca’s words, it seemed he was content to feign ignorance and allow them to take the sage.

‘There must be one reason for this. He’s confident that whatever the Cavalry’s investigation reveals about the sage, he can deny any involvement.’

Indeed, Duke Diarca had already demonstrated his skill at evading responsibility right before their eyes. Even if incontrovertible evidence of collusion were presented, the old raccoon would surely laugh it off, pushing others forward while he retreated into the background.

Just as he had callously abandoned Baron Durmand after gifting poisoned wine to Yuder at the previous party.

Pruelle was well aware that such an attitude from someone who undoubtedly knew he had guessed the truth was nothing less than a complete disregard for the Cavalry, neither more nor less.

Could there be a clearer demonstration that he did not consider the Cavalry a worthy adversary?

Pruelle, struggling to contain his rising anger, managed a smooth smile.

“Haha, what seems like luck often requires ten inevitabilities, doesnt it? Please remember that the Cavalry is always dedicated to the security and well-being of the Empire and its capital.”

He bowed his head in a greeting to Duke Diarca and then turned away. As much as it galled him, engaging further with the monstrous elder in hopes of gaining even a slight advantage was futile. The best course of action was to retreat at this point.

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Chapter 745

He had always considered himself adept at enduring insults and disregard, but now he painfully realized how far he still had to go as a young man.

The members of the Cavalry, upon meeting Pruelle's gaze, moved along with him to apprehend the sage and Diemon.

"Oh no! It hurts! Don't touch me! Sage!"

Before Ever could even lay a hand on him, Diemon thrashed and screamed. The sage remained silent, even as hands reached to seize him, perhaps because he sensed that Duke Diarca would feign ignorance. His slightly darkened, composed expression unnerved Pruelle.

'What is he thinking?'

Just as his hand was about to grab the sage's shoulder, the sage spoke to Duke Diarca, who was conversing with Kiolle.

"It's all a misunderstanding."

The Duke did not look back.

"The only regret I have is that I remained silent, believing that His Grace Duke Diarca would someday understand, despite knowing his overly negative perception of us."

This time, Kiolle, in a dramatic gesture, shuddered and pulled his father away. Yet, the Sage, undeterred, spoke again for the third time.

“You have never once inquired about my abilities, Your Grace. Soon, you will know. And then…”

“Oh, this man really talks too much!”

Finn blindfolded the sage and gagged him. The Sage ceased his mumbling and stood up, led away by the Cavalry members, his arms firmly held. Just as people began to lose interest in his pitiful figure, a sudden announcement came.

“Your Grace, urgent news!”

A knight of the Diarca household rushed in, shouting. The Duke, about to chide him for the noise, changed his expression upon hearing the whispered words.

His gaze swiftly moved beyond the lake of the Fourth Wall District, towards the distant, shimmering Imperial Palace in the First Wall District.

“Kiolle, it seems today is not the day for our walk. I will hear your earlier question later. We must go now.”

“Where to?”

Kiolle, sensing the unusual atmosphere, blinked confusedly. The Duke did not answer but turned his head towards the captive sage. His brows furrowed in displeasure.

With his eyes and mouth covered, the sage, as if sensing something, smiled.

“The Crown Prince urgently requires his healers. We should postpone investigating this man.”

The statement resounded among the Cavalry.

Ever later wrote of the subsequent events.

Elle felt that the sinister premonition he had experienced was related to this incident. We protested, insisting that we could not hand over the captured individual, but the Duke's party countered, citing the priority of imperial family members health and suggesting that we investigate the sage's other captured companions instead.

Duke Diarca halted the members' actions by arguing the lack of concrete evidence implicating the sage as the culprit and the fact that the sage himself had not admitted any guilt. Even as Finn attempted a final protest, knights threatened him with swords for restraint. Of course, such threats wouldn't intimidate Finn, but this act itself was a testament to the Duke's resolute intent.

To the Cavalry, any argument about their right to investigate the sage, an Awakener, was futile against the Dukes power. He hinted they might all be accused of disrespecting and insulting the imperial family member if they refused his 'proposal.'

Ultimately, the members agreed to arrest only three individuals, excluding Diemon and the sage, and had no choice but to watch as they vanished from sight.

"*What transpired in the Bright Palace remains unknown, as His Majesty the Emperor has yet to speak. Our knowledge is limited to what we've uncovered through Kanna and others' inquiries. We confirmed that two carriages secretly visited Diarca's residence at dawn today and then slipped away. One headed beyond Second Wall District, while the other escaped the capital.*"

One carriage was within the Second Wall District, the other had fled the capital. It was plausible that the Sage either re-entered the palace or escaped the city.

"*The fault is entirely mine. I should have prepared and responded more cautiously. It's only right that I face criticism for failing to fulfill my duties as the Deputy Commander. I will report back as soon as*

we interrogate the three captives and ascertain the sage's whereabouts. I regret that I cannot bring you better news."

Ever and the Cavalry members deeply regretted and blamed themselves, evident in these short sentences.

Upon lifting his gaze from the letter he had been perusing, Yuder watched as Kishiar neatly folded it and placed it on the desk.

"Now, what shall we do?" pondered Kishiar.

"Ever dislikes being spared from criticism if she feels she has failed in her responsibilities. However, if you, Commander, prefer not to reprimand her, I suggest assigning her a more challenging task as a form of punishment. Others might consider hard training or harsh scolding as punishment, but that won't work for Ever," Yuder advised.

Kishiar, in a soft voice, inquired, "I've always sensed you understand and are closer to Ever Beck than others. Did you act similarly in a previous game?"

It then occurred to him Had he not detailed the previous Cavalry to Kishiar? He had briefly mentioned past and future events, but not in such detail, judging it unnecessary.

After a moment of silence, Yuder nodded, "Yes. Ever was also the Shin Deputy Commander in a previous game, so I'm certainly more familiar with her than others. To say we're close is an overstatement, though…"

"Even after spending so long together, you still don't consider each other close?"

"That's the reality."

Yuder remembered Ever’s missions and how they were executed, but they had never engaged in casual conversation or dined together. Despite both joining the Cavalry at its inception, they maintained formal titles and a certain distance in their interactions until the end. Yuder had always trusted Ever’s exceptional capabilities, but personal details were a different matter.

What she liked, who she was close to, whom she married - such things weren’t of interest to the Yuder of that time.

“…Such things don’t necessarily define closeness. But still, having spent time together, I can more accurately predict how Ever will act in certain situations than I can with other members.”

Upon hearing Yuder’s explanation, Kishiar remained silent for a while. Just as Yuder, wondering if he had misspoken, was about to speak again, Kishiar enveloped him in an embrace, accompanied by a sigh that resembled laughter.

“So… what about now?”

“…”

“Do you still think the same way?”

The answer to that question had been settled long ago. Yuder, with a bitter, faint smile tinged with past regrets, shook his head.

“No. I believe I am quite close to Ever now. Though I’m not sure if Ever feels the same, I think it’s unlikely that she doesn’t.”

“That’s good to hear. From what I can tell, Ever also seems to hold you in close regard. I would have been saddened had you said otherwise.”

Kishiar’s perspective probably made it so, but Yuder couldn’t help feeling a bit embarrassed. He brought to mind Ever from his previous

life and uttered a thought he had often contemplated.

“One of the biggest mistakes I thought I made, as the previous game was coming to an end, was…”

“Not paying attention to those around you?”

“Yes.”

Yuder had not trusted or wished to know about those around him. He was always sharp, always prioritizing tasks above everything else. He hadn’t considered moving the other pieces on the board, trying instead to play all roles by himself.

It was no wonder he had faced defeat.

Yuder didn’t voice this last thought. He didn’t want Kishiar to sit alone somewhere unseen, as he had in the past, ruminating over his words and feeling upset.

Instead, he changed the subject.

“…So, how do you plan to respond to the letter?”

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Chapter 746

“…So, how do you plan to respond to the letter?”

Kishiar’s arms, which were holding Yuder, relaxed. His red eyes, lost in thought, scanned the surface of Ever’s letter.

“We must wait for news from His Majesty’s side before making a firm decision. However, I believe it is highly likely that the sage has escaped beyond the capital, and that is what we should prepare for,” he reasoned.

The confidence in his conclusion, drawn merely from the letter, was notable. Kishiar soon explained his reasoning.

“It’s no coincidence that Katchian summoned the sage so opportunely. After spending a long period under such ideal conditions for brainwashing, it’s likely the sage was already in his grasp in some way.”

Yuder had already considered this possibility.

“I too surmised that the sage, while hiding, must have strived to contact Duke Diarca and Crown Prince Katchian to find a way to save his life. Probably through the use of Baron Renbow. This would also explain how he timely escaped from the Cavalry. But how does this relate to your assumption that he headed out of the capital?”

“According to the letter, Duke Diarca was unaware of the sage’s true abilities until he saw Katchian. What do you think happened after that encounter?”

Instead of a direct answer, Kishiar posed a question, his lips curling coldly. Yuder then understood why Kishiar had reached his conclusion.

“…He must have realized the true nature of sages abilities, just as he wished.”

It was uncertain how much Duke Diarca had comprehended about the ability to brainwash. However, it was clear he must have realized the sage’s power to manipulate the Crown Prince at will. What could the old fox-like Duke have thought upon learning this?

One thing was certain: he wouldn’t have welcomed it.

Duke Diarca’s power was realized through Crown Prince Katchian. Would he really want someone else trying to influence the Crown Prince?

‘Unlikely.’

But the sage must have anticipated this danger. He knew well that to gain power and survive, he must prove that his abilities were useful to the Crown Prince and, most importantly, to Duke Diarca, and pose no harm.

Kishiar nodded, as if understanding Yuder’s thoughts.

“Perhaps this incident led the sage to convey a dual message to Duke Diarca: ‘Don’t discard me like the others. If cornered, I can use the Crown Prince to my advantage,’ and simultaneously, ‘But this ability could be immensely beneficial to you.’ What kind of response could the Duke have to that?”

“The safest approach for Duke Diarca would be to separate the sage from the Crown Prince’s side and then demand proof.”

“Exactly. So it’s certain that he’s the one who left the palace.”

“Then the sage would seek to prove his loyalty in the best possible place.”

“And where might that be?”

Yuder didn’t ponder long.

Throughout the cycles of life, some individuals never change, despite changing circumstances and motivations. Like Nahan, who claimed to act for the Awakeners but ultimately prioritized his own hatred, and the sage, who deceived those who trusted him in his quest for power.

Yuder felt a strong conviction that the sage, like Nahan who had vanished southward, was repeating the end of his previous life.

With this conviction, he replied in a cool voice.

“This place, it seems like the south.”

The south, where the sage’s original stronghold was located, was also where Kishiar, the ideal prey for Duke Diarca in the current situation, resided.

The sage, intent on proving his trustworthiness, would undoubtedly be unable to resist this temptation.

Kishiar’s eyes softened gently.

“I think so too.”

“I don’t expect things to go as he wishes, but we must be prepared.”

“Indeed. It’s actually more efficient to handle everything here in one go.”

Yuder admired Kishiar’s ability to describe the explosive situation so calmly. He liked Kishiar’s confident and relaxed tone.

‘Truth be told, I understand the frustration of Ever and the others… but from my perspective, this situation is not the worst for us.’

The reason was simple. On the day the sage appeared to meet Duke Diarca, Yuder suspected that the sage’s original purpose was ultimately unfulfilled.

The sage sought out Duke Diarca for help. But would Duke Diarca have readily offered assistance upon meeting him?

The sage must have known that the Duke was not a man of warm heart. Despite the sage’s diligent efforts to heal the Crown Prince, disrupt the Cavalry’s second recruitment, and go on a mission along with his subordinates at the Sun Palace, his actions always fell short of satisfying Duke Diarca. According to Kiolle, their first direct encounter was only recently. At that level, their relationship was barely a cautious acquaintance.

If the catastrophic failure in the south had already reached the capital, Duke Diarca might have tried to kill the sage even before giving him a chance to flee the city.

Yet, if the sage went to Duke Diarca, it was not out of mere confidence. Yuder, more familiar with Awakeners than anyone, sensed the sage’s real intention was to ‘forcefully persuade’ Duke Diarca.

A euphemism for brainwashing, really.

Though the exact conditions for the sage’s ability to brainwash were unknown, Kanna had speculated, based on cases involving members from the Star of Nagran, that ‘trust’ might be the key. Yuder agreed with this theory.

However, even if the conditions for exercising the ability were not fully met, it didn’t mean there was no way to use it.

‘It’s rare, but… some mental ability users can exert a part of their power even in non-ideal situations, through special conditions or sacrifices…’

For instance, Gloe, the card-reader and former Jung Deputy Commander of the Cavalry Yuder once led in his past life.

Her power manifested through tangible, old cards. Without them, she couldn’t use her abilities, so her enemies always targeted her cards.

But when Gloe was disarmed and her life hung by a thread, she miraculously created intangible cards to use her powers. Although she couldn’t perform this miracle often and had to rest for days afterward, it was a remarkable feat. From this, Yuder realized that some could momentarily exert their powers even when the conditions for activation were not met.

‘It was possible due to tremendous experience and effort… But come to think of it, isn’t the sage also someone who has used his abilities more than any other Awakeners in the world right now?’

The sage had a history of brainwashing countless people who entered the Star of Nagran. It wouldn’t be surprising if he knew a way to briefly brainwash Duke Diarca, even in unfavorable conditions.

‘But, it didn’t go as planned.’

The ways of the world never seem to bend to the will of just one person. The sage, potentially capable of forcibly brainwashing Duke Diarca, unexpectedly encountered Kiolle at the last moment.

Recalling all the foolish acts of Kiolle mentioned in the letters, Yuder couldn’t help but let out a wry laugh.

‘To think that he would suddenly appear and be of help…’

Informing Kiolle about the sage’s abilities and instructing him to monitor any strange behavior of Duke Diarca was just a precautionary measure. Yuder had even added that if Kiolle acted too suspiciously, he might end up brainwashed by the sage, so he should be loud and disruptive.

Who would have thought that these instructions would become a shield that accurately thwarted the sage in that critical moment?

Thanks to this, it seemed neither Kiolle nor Duke Diarca had fallen under the sage’s influence and remained sane, which was far from the worst outcome.

Soon after, Myra returned. Together, they went outside to assist in cleaning up the southern branch and completely erasing the traces of monsters, before disbanding. The south, which had been buzzing with ominous news all day, became momentarily peaceful.

The Cavalry members, busy imprisoning and interrogating the captives, had no rest, but their eyes still shone brightly, possibly due to the lingering excitement of battle. The same was true for the imperial soldiers and the recruits helping them.

The letter from Emperor Keilusa arrived that evening. The Emperor first explained that it took time to plant new mediators of his power since the previous ones were discarded, then shared the information he had gathered.

Duke Diarca seems to have sent the sage to the south. Katchian protested, but is now quiet. The sage seems closer to Duke Diarcas men and subtly hinted hes the real perpetrator of the Sun Palace invasion, but it seems they didnt believe him. I’ll try again. I heard theres been another major incident in the south. Are there any injured? If you need help, let me know.’

“His Majesty’s grace is as vast as the sea.”

Kishiar smiled as he burned the letter containing the information.

“Our suspicions have been confirmed now.”

“Yes. Now it’s time to call in those we need.”

Kishiar picked up his pen. He wrote down several names from the headquarters in the capital to be dispatched for additional support to the south, then penned the name of the person in charge at the top.

“I’m thinking of appointing Ever Beck as the leader.”

“Is that the punishment you’ve decided?”

“Yes.”

It was a good decision. Ever, for sure, would relentlessly pursue the sage until he was captured for good.

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Chapter 747

Kishiar had listed many names on the dispatch roster, in addition to the members' names. Among them were Enon, Hellem, and even Alik, a disciple of Thais Yulman.

"Why are you calling for Alik?" Yuder inquired.

"After confirming from the West that the ability suppression device he created was useful, I contacted him to prioritize its production over his other tasks," Kishiar explained.

"Did you, indeed?"

"Though we could keep him there and only have the device sent to us, the uncertainty of variables made it wiser to summon the creator himself. We can source the materials here as well."

Yuder recalled giving Marty, who struggled with ability control in the West, one of the first prototypes of Alik's suppression device. While it hadn't worked for Yuder, fortunately, it was of satisfactory help to Marty.

Kishiar, too, had briefly acknowledged this success in a report. It was astonishing that he hadn't forgotten about it and had separately contacted Alik. His thoroughness in overseeing the entire strategy and preparing moves, while also demonstrating remarkable insight, was impressive.

Alik's suppression device, designed for the Awakener, would be of great help in the current situation, which required dealing with and investigating a large number of such individuals.

"The response to this incident is essentially complete for now. With more dispatches than expected, the speed of movement will be

key," Kishiar noted, after sealing the last part of his written correspondence with a coded signature.

Yuder watched the messenger bird, which had fed to its heart's content, take off into the night sky, bearing the letter in a pouch tied to its leg, destined for the capital.

In the few days since arriving in the south, numerous events had transpired. They were simultaneous yet intricately connected, like scattered bombs detonating in unison. The underground fighting ring in the south trying to devour the region. The death and danger to the successor candidate of the Herne Ducal Family, which had greatly influenced the imperial politics in his previous life. The strange crack and monsters, reminding him of a disaster he believed would come only years later.

The strife within the Star of Nagran that even affected the Cavalry, and the Southerners who were secretly entangled in all these events.

To Yuder, the most critical among these were the bizarre crack and the Southerners.

I've found or halfway solved solutions to prevent the others from recurring. But these two are different.

The Southerners, suspected of causing the crack, were either dead or captured. Even the leader, Aton, had been safely transported here by the Cavalry and was still unconscious, with interrogation scheduled for the following day.

But could he be certain that the phenomenon of the bizarre crack would not recur?

If the seeds of a disaster, similar to his previous life, had already been sown, and today's events were just the beginning?

Then what Yuder had to face was no longer within the realm of human affairs.

Only he remembered the great earthquake in the South, a tremendous disaster that he must somehow avert.

“The messenger bird is long out of sight, yet you’re still deep in thought. Whats on your mind?

His complex thoughts halted at the gentle voice from behind. Yuder closed the window and turned around. The man, leaning against the desk and looking at him, quietly smiled.

Finally, a hint of fatigue crept into Yuder’s eyes, which had until then maintained an unwavering, iron-like vigor.

He hesitated slightly before replying, “I was reflecting on today’s events and pondering over the phenomenon of the bizarre crack.”

“That means among all that happened today, the crack worried you the most. Do you think they’re related to the ‘disaster’ you said is coming?”

Indeed, with Kishiar, there was seldom a need for lengthy explanations.

“Yes. I don’t think it’s an undue concern.”

“It’s hard to believe, even having seen it with my own eyes, that people could invoke this crack. If it’s happened once, it’s certainly possible again.”

Kishiar produced a stone with a black hue from his pocket, a relic retrieved from the possessions of the Southern merchants who had chosen death.

“This seems to be a fragment of an ancient dragon’s bone.”

“A dragon’s bone, you say?”

“You remember the medium Thais Yulman created for storing the power of the Red Stone, don’t you? This has similar properties to the ancient dragon’s heart fragment used in that, but of a lower grade. Simply put, it’s one of the materials capable of containing power.”

Thais Yulman had successfully created a medium to transfer the pure power of the Red Stone, using a mix of an ancient dragon’s heart fragment, ancient fairy dust, and an element called Eucalractium. The dragon’s heart fragment and fairy dust were premium materials known for their ability to store power.

“Even if it’s of a lower grade, a dragon’s bone isn’t common. It’s mostly used as a core in magic artifacts, so ordinary people rarely see the raw material.”

“If it can contain power, does it still hold something inside?”

Kishiar shook his head. “No. It’s empty, without any energy.”

“Then…”

“It’s one of two possibilities. Either the energy it once contained has been completely depleted, or it was intended to hold something else.”

Kishiar, mumbling to himself, played with the black stone, tossing it lightly in the air before catching it and putting it back in his pocket.

“We’ll know more once the dispatched personnel arrive.”

Even as the black stone disappeared from view, Yuder’s thoughts on the crack and the impending earthquake didn’t completely fade. Were there aspects he had missed in the heat of battle? Should he delve deeper into his past memories for anything that might help

now? Numerous plans and memories churned chaotically in his anxious mind.

Watching Yuder's unsettled expression, Kishiar took off his dust-covered coat and hung it on the chair.

Yuder, slightly taken aback, swallowed his surprise and asked, "Commander? Why are you…"

"Hm? I need to wash. We've done everything we can for today. I can't stay dusty forever."

With a playful wink, Kishiar gestured towards the adjoining room beyond the desk. Yuder suddenly realized where they were.

'Ah… this room used to belong to the noble who owned this building, with an attached bathroom and bedroom.'

The Southern branch's building was originally an old noble's mansion, left unused and vacant. Despite its wear, elements throughout hinted at its once-grand past.

In the temporary office that Kishiar was using, originally the master bedroom of the house, the members had converted the largest bedroom into a makeshift meeting room and office, turning the slightly smaller adjoining room into a bedroom. Unusually for an office, a bathroom was just beyond a single door.

Yuder, careful not to stare too intently at Kishiar as he unbuttoned his shirt, quickly averted his eyes. Even though he was well aware of what lay beneath those clothes, now was not the time to focus on that.

"I've stayed too late. My apologies. Please, rest comfortably."

"Are you really planning to leave just like that?"

“…”

His feet, poised to turn away, halted at the sound of that low voice. It felt as though he was bound by some power, yet he knew all too well that wasn’t the case.

“You’re thinking now is not the time for this, right? Planning to go back and immerse yourself in work again without even lying down.”

“…”

Yuder had doubted several times whether Kishiar truly lacked the ability to read minds, but this time was the most convincing.

Yuder, rather than denying it, remained silent. Kishiar let out a laugh, akin to a sigh, much like when he had embraced him earlier.

“It’s okay.”

“…”

“Look at me.”

“…”

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Chapter 748

“It’s okay.”

“…”

“Look at me.”

“…”

Drawn by his voice, Yuder slowly lifted his gaze which he had been casting down.

The first thing he saw was the bare body inside the completely unbuttoned shirt. The smooth and firm skin, devoid of any scars, and the endless, hill-like muscles rhythmically swelled and receded with the owner’s breath. Yuder stared at it for a long time before lifting his gaze a little higher.

Next, he saw a straight, long collarbone like the horizon, and above that, neck muscles stretched out like old tree branches. Following these branches led to golden hair, shining through the leaves like sunlight. Once Yuder started looking, he found it impossible to stop.

When Yuders gaze finally reached his destination, resting upon the gentle curve of his lips and red eyes, Kishiar smiled deeply as if to celebrate this arrival.

“How is it?”

“…What exactly are you referring to?”

“I mean, do you feel like resting a bit now?”

Could one suddenly feel the need to rest just by looking at someone’s body? Logically, it was a ridiculous thought, but Yuder found himself unable to argue.

It wasnt that seeing Kishiar made him want to lie down and rest. However, the urge to be by his side, overpowering time and circumstance, was undeniable.

He had avoided looking directly because he knew this feeling would melt everything else in his mind if Kishiar wished it, just like now.

Yuder sighed softly, and Kishiar let out a laugh.

“Listen. I understand your eagerness to immerse yourself in urgent matters. But no matter how many tasks there are, what can be done today can only be done today. For instance celebrating together with the one you most wanted to show, after using the divine sword and aura for the first time in battle against monsters.”

Yuder was momentarily stunned by this unexpected statement.

Usually, those who suggested he rest did so on the premise that human strength and energy are not infinite. The human body cannot function eternally without recharging. It was a reasoning that inevitably made sense.

But Kishiar presented a different perspective for resting now.

Today marked his first public display of fighting using the divine sword and aura. Therefore, it was the only day they could commemorate this together.

How could Yuder ignore or overlook such a statement, knowing that Kishiar, who had to conceal his strength for so long, had for a moment fought freely?

Kishiar asked with an air of finality.

“Will you not join me, then?”

Defeated. Had Yuder been able to out-argue Kishiar La Orr, he likely wouldnt be in this place. From the moment he was drawn to look at Kishiar by his words, this outcome was all but inevitable.

“…Very well.”

Yuder finally responded, smiling at the man.

Steam rose like swirling mists above the large, antique bathtub, built in a style from centuries ago. Though it was large enough to easily accommodate several people, the two men inside sat overlapped as if in a much smaller tub.

Yuder gazed at the rippling water at chest level, feeling the heartbeat of the man behind him pressing against his back. Even sitting here, cleansed of dust, blood, and the fluids of monsters, he found himself unable to ponder any thoughts.

The only sensations he was aware of were the warm emptiness in his head and the languid embrace of Kishiar’s scent, as if it had been waiting for him.

In fact, Kishiar’s fragrance had been intensely strong even before entering the bathroom. Yuder only noticed it now, not because they were closer due to their nearly embracing posture, but because Yuder’s mind had been so preoccupied with other matters.

Water droplets trickling down his wet hair, annoyingly tapping against his eyelashes, didn’t prompt Yuder to act. He simply stared blankly until the large hand that had been around his waist emerged from the water and gently brushed his bangs away.

Thank you.

However, after sweeping aside the hair, the hand did not retreat. It lightly caressed his bare forehead, tracing the path of the water droplets down to his nose, then to his cheeks and chin. The moment the hand lightly touched the nape of his neck, a slippery yet ticklish sensation made his spine shiver. The contact of wet skin heightened the sensitivity of an already sensitive area.

Yet Yuder, stiffening his shoulders, did not reject the touch. Leaning his head back with a hot breath, the hand finally withdrew, replaced by lips softly touching his forehead.

The journey of those lips from his forehead, tracing the path previously touched by the hand, felt like a predetermined sequence, culminating in a kiss on the lips.

The kiss was deeper and slower than usual.

This deepened the languor in both his body and mind, making it almost too difficult to keep his eyelids open.

After the kiss, Yuder exhaled deeply, trying not to close his eyes, as if fearing the weight pressing down on his body.

Kishiar whispered softly in his ear.

Are you sleepy?

No.

He wasnt sleepy, just feeling heavy.

You can sleep, its okay.

Didnt you say you wanted to be together for the memory?

Being together still counts even if one falls asleep. Thats enough.

Thats not possible.

What was enough? Yuder thought, adjusting his position to clear his mind. He turned his body, which had been resting on Kishiar's lap, to face him, eliciting a laugh of disappointment from the man.

Were farther apart now. But, I can see your face better, so this is good too.

Yuder intently watched Kishiar's hand, playfully scooping and pushing water towards him, concerned about the arm that had sustained a light injury earlier. Fortunately, his hand appeared as healthy and intact as before. With no significant pain in his own hand, Yuder concluded the healer introduced by Myra was unquestionably skilled.

Yuder resolved to establish immediate contact with that healer tomorrow. With their stay in the south now confirmed to be longer, securing such support was essential.

Still we must avoid a repeat of todays events.

Yuders mind briefly buzzed with plans for emergency supplies, securing local allies, and organizing available human and material resources, before fatigue submerged these thoughts again.

Are you still worried about this hand?

Kishiar seemed to notice Yuder's gaze and waved his hand.

"Of course, I am concerned. The Commander could have suffered a more severe injury."

"I won't say I was just lucky. It was a lapse in my judgment."

Kishiar, with furrowed brows, silently smiled.

"I knew monsters, even of the same kind, don't share identical traits, yet I erred. I failed to fully grasp the difference between

observing from afar and facing them directly. That oversight nearly put you in danger while you were assisting. A mere hand injury is a small price to pay. It was foolish of me.”

Kishiar’s self-critique seemed too harsh to be merely about his combat skills. Yuder, thinking Kishiar was perhaps reflecting on his battle prowess under the guise of rest, quickly shook his head in disagreement.

“That’s not correct, Commander. Your judgment under those circumstances was the best possible. If anything, it was my responsibility to identify and communicate the monster’s traits, and my failure to respond promptly is to blame. If anyone should bear the cost, it should be me.”

“That seems even less correct to me.”

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Chapter 749

From that moment, the two began to meticulously dissect their recent battle with the monster, discussing every movement and sword direction in detail. Essentially, each was trying to prove and persuade that while the other had made the best choice, they themselves had not.

Of course, no one was persuaded, and though a considerable amount of time passed without a conclusion, the atmosphere gradually became softer and more heated.

“When you faced the eleventh monster, Commander, you changed the direction of your sword to draw it in. That didn’t seem like your original intention, am I right?”

“Yes, that’s true. Initially, I intended to push it away. But somehow, it felt like the right move. Turned out to be a good decision in the end.”

“I agree with you there. If you had pushed it away, it would have been difficult to effectively check the twelfth one due to the distance. Though you said it wasn’t a conscious decision, Commander, with your broad vision, you must have been observing the twelfth’s movement pattern. So…”

“Ah, I see. So this ‘instinct’ that comes during battle, beyond the target I’m directly looking at, is informed by information from my peripheral vision? That’s an insightful analysis. It would have been hard to understand without experiencing it myself. So when you face multiple enemies…”

The Cavalry often reflected on their battles afterward, discussing tactics and post-battle scenarios. However, this level of detailed and

direct analysis of each combat technique, akin to analyzing a sports game, was not typical.

Looking closely at every small movement in battle was entirely different from discussing tactics. Tactics required a certain degree of objectivity, as they needed to be viewed from above the battlefield. But this was neither objective nor professional. It was merely a sharing of memories that only those who had fought together or who were deeply interested in swordsmanship or martial arts theory could enjoy.

Yet, strangely, he didn’t want to end this seemingly pointless conversation.

Yuder, realizing somewhat belatedly that he was quite immersed and enjoying this discussion, felt a peculiar sense of embarrassment.

‘Wasn’t this conversation supposed to be about something else?’

So engrossed were they in their conversation that they hadn’t noticed how much time had passed, and the water had cooled considerably. Yuder casually released some energy, warming the entire bath. The water, which had cooled, suddenly emitted steam as if freshly heated.

Kishiar, realizing what Yuder had done, paused and opened his eyes.

“You warmed the water?”

“I didn’t realize how much time had passed. We can’t let our bodies cool down.”

Kishiar, unfazed, simply widened his eyes. It was then that Yuder realized, not just how absorbed he was in the conversation, but something else too.

“The flow of our conversation just now…”

“Haha.”

“It was indeed your intention, Commander.”

In hindsight, Yuder should have realized it earlier. Kishiar was a master of conversation, adept at steering discussions as he pleased. Even with Yuder as his counterpart, changing the course of the conversation was effortless if he so intended.

The delayed realization was partly due to fatigue, and also…

“But it was enjoyable, wasn’t it?”

Yes. The enjoyment of the conversation was indeed the reason.

Initially, Kishiar had drawn upon all his combat knowledge, hoping to convince Yuder not to regard his first battle as a failure or an unpleasant memory. Yuder was most knowledgeable about combat techniques related to the abilities of the Awakeners, but he was also confident in his understanding of swordsmanship, various weapon skills, and martial arts, not falling behind in any of these areas.

Even in areas he was less familiar with, his abundant combat experience helped fill any gaps. Naturally, examples from past experiences and newly discovered knowledge intermingled in their conversation, to which Kishiar showed great interest.

Conversely, while Kishiar might have been far behind Yuder in combat experience, he possessed a natural analytical ability and a vast academic knowledge so extensive that its depths were unfathomable. Many of the unusual insights he mentioned were difficult to grasp through experience alone.

It was only natural for Yuder to be captivated by Kishiar's eloquence as he generously shared his theoretical knowledge.

Yuder realized that he had never before engaged in such an objective and enthusiastic analysis and discussion of his past battles without any specific purpose. In his previous life, he had no desire for such conversations, and his comrades in this life were still too inexperienced in both knowledge and battle to freely discuss combat with him.

Kishiar spoke with a hint of amusement in his voice.

"It's only natural for one who wields a sword to enjoy discussions about swordsmanship. I certainly do, especially when it comes to analyzing battles I've personally fought in. How could one not find it interesting?"

"I didn't start this conversation for fun."

"So, did you dislike it?"

"…No."

Yuder wondered if everything had played out exactly as Kishiar intended but decided not to dwell on it any further. His mind and heart, heavy with fatigue until a moment ago, now felt surprisingly light.

"The conversation shifted direction midway, so we didn't reach a conclusion, but I hope Commander, you won't take today's unexpected events during the battle to heart."

"Shouldn't one who is harsh on their own mistakes be equally stern with others?"

"That's irrelevant."

Perhaps it was the lightness of his body and mind that made it easier for thoughts previously weighed down in his head to flow smoothly from his lips.

“If you, Commander ask why, I just want to say that during today’s battle with the monsters, you seemed more free-spirited than ever.”

Kishiar’s expression, previously cheerful, shifted subtly.

“Ah, that doesn’t mean I thought you looked constrained before or that you were neglecting the seriousness of the battle… Anyway, I thought it looked good. So, if possible, I hope that in the future you can be more…”

What more could he add to accurately convey the emotions he felt then? He wanted to say that he hoped Kishiar could continue to engage in battle freely and joyfully. Before Yuder could find the words, Kishiar spoke.

“No, you don’t need to say more. I think I understand what you mean.”

There was no trace of the previous mirth in Kishiar’s voice.

Yuder tried to discern his expression, but Kishiar suddenly scooped up water with his hands and washed his face, making it impossible to see.

The only sound that filled the space between them was the gentle splashing of Kishiar repeatedly scooping and pouring water over his face.

After a few more repetitions, the man finally slowly lowered the hands that had been covering his face.

In place of his familiar smile, Kishiar’s expression now mirrored the freedom he had displayed in the heat of battle.

Yuder’s heart clenched as if gripped by an unseen hand, beating wildly for a moment.

Slowly wiping the water trailing down his chin, Kishiar spoke in a subdued voice.

“I mentioned it as a commemoration, but honestly, I didn’t consider it truly worthy of such… until now.”

His whisper, carrying the heat of subterranean lava, seemed to transfer its warmth to the listener.

“Only after hearing your words did I realize that it indeed might have been something commendable.”

“…”

“Perhaps it’s because it’s the first time I’ve been told that more could be done.”

A self-deprecating smile flickered at the edges of his blurred words, his red eyes holding a multitude of emotions as they fixed on Yuder.

A voice that only Yuder Aile in this world could hear continued.

“To know that someone else, not just me, clearly understands what I felt for the first time today… it’s joyous, almost miraculous.”

“…”

“Yes. I’m happy.”

Repeating the words, Kishiar’s lips formed a bright smile.

“Thank you for saying that.”

If Yuder had not understood the weight of years behind those words, he might not have felt the same way now.

But Yuder could guess the countless moments of enduring patience that Kishiar had weathered to finally say those words. He might have been a man who could have vanished without ever experiencing the liberation he felt today.

No one who saw or heard of his single-handed battle against the numerous monsters today could imagine those hidden moments, nor would they guess that this man with such a smile was a young man not even thirty years old.

Yuder’s heart leaped wildly, a flame surging up from deep within, sending shivers down his spine.

He couldn’t hold it in any longer. He had to express this overwhelming feeling somehow.

Yuder rose and collapsed into Kishiars neck. The man, as if he had been waiting, embraced Yuder in his arms and buried his head. The water was churning and overflowing, but no one cared.

Their lips met in an inevitable collision, with no clear initiator.

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Chapter 750

Yuder rose and collapsed into Kishiars neck. The man, as if he had been waiting, embraced Yuder in his arms and buried his head. The water was churning and overflowing, but no one cared.

Their lips met in an inevitable collision, with no clear initiator.

Instead of the previous languid lethargy, a powerful sensation, as if souls were intertwining and being sucked in, took its place. Every time their wet skin clashed and tongues entangled, Yuder felt emotions, not in words but like water droplets, tapping inside his head. It was like a conduit of shared emotions created from the entwined desires of both. Along this invisible path, things deeper and more secretive than words flowed ceaselessly, up and down.

Describing the feeling of another’s emotions seeping inside was difficult. In his previous life, Yuder often couldn’t distinguish between his own feelings and those from Kishiar.

But now it was different. The emotions coming from Kishiar were so immense and vast that it would be strange not to notice them.

Yuder lightly shivered as he received overwhelming ecstasy and a sensation so full it tightened his heart, far more intense than what the eyes could perceive.

Emotions beyond one’s capacity to accept sometimes felt akin to pain. This was because Yuder knew not many kinds of emotions, and among them, pain was the most familiar and diverse.

However, not everything similar to pain was agony. Although Yuder couldn’t yet name all the tremendous emotions he felt with Kishiar, he felt certain he now understood this truth.

He struggled to breathe, desperately trying to assimilate the thick emotions without pushing them away.

If these were the feelings Kishiar harbored for him at the moment, Yuder didn't want to let even a single one slip away. He had to somehow swallow them, make them his own.

As he accepted the flood of emotions that almost burst his body, his grip on Kishiar's shoulder tightened, and even their entwined tongues quivered. Kishiar, embracing this fervently, held Yuder's hips and pulled him in even deeper. It was difficult to breathe in such a deep embrace, but that only made it more exhilarating. Yuder wished for even more skin contact, even if it meant breaking apart.

Hnn Ugh.

Kishiar, too, was receiving this shared emotion, not just Yuder. At Yuder's longing, Kishiar's eyelashes fluttered violently in response. Yuder exhaled a suppressed breath of pleasure as he felt the arms around his waist tighten.

Standing before the immense wave of emotion felt both terrifying and ecstatic. The feeling of being engulfed, never to resurface, was imminent, yet he did not wish to escape.

Like a small being alone on a sandy beach, he opened himself up, willingly accepting the wave crashing over him.

Ah

Yuder aggressively swallowed the saliva flowing through their entangled kiss. Without parting lips, moving his lower abdomen and legs, he wrapped himself tightly around Kishiar's waist submerged in the water. With the splashing water, two hot, firm forms slid between their pressed bellies.

The sensation of swallowing saliva felt like igniting a fire within, a pleasure so intense. The submerged lower abdomen, overwhelmed by this vivid pleasure, instinctively quivered. The mere rubbing between the thighs, already scorching hot, set the mind ablaze. Yet, the fleeting contact with the other intensified this sensation, igniting the nerves like a spark.

Yuder, repeatedly sliding, touching, then parting in response to these sensations, finally could not restrain himself and grasped both organs with his hand.

“Uh…”

“Ah…!”

Grasping both in one hand was impossible, so he merely held them close, eliciting a pleasure far greater than before. The sounds he couldn’t suppress echoed off the steamy bathroom walls, reflecting like in a cave, feeling shamelessly lewd.

Yuder, while caressing the sensitive tips with his fingers, gazed at Kishiar. Through his hazy vision, he saw red eyes, just as lost in him. His own reflection in those eyes appeared more like a fierce hunter about to pounce on its prey rather than a lover gazing at their beloved. Although his face seemed more angry than sweet, the same could be said for Kishiar.

Every time Kishiar received Yuder’s emotions, he would look down, moan softly, and repeatedly grip and release his hip. The kissing of the nape, the hot breaths, and the sucking of the chest were all intensely sensual.

Captivated by a poignant longing, Kishiar La Orr thought of nothing but Yuder. Could there be a more provocative, scandalous being?

Yuder wanted to see him unrestrained in his pleasure. Gripping and stroking harder, he pushed their hips together. Kishiar released a trembling breath between the lips buried below Yuder's collarbone.

The breath, almost like a laugh, made Kishiar's emotions surge into Yuder again.

An unbearable, painful outcry, wanting to pour everything out.

A thrill, as if being drained entirely.

But above all these emotions was an indescribable feeling, shaking and tearing at the heart.

This emotion, clogging the throat, made all other pleasures seem tiny.

Overwhelmed, Yuder found it hard to breathe. His eyes burned with heat.

Unable to contain these emotions within, it felt like a world filled only with Kishiar was about to burst.

Perhaps, it already had…

"Ha…"

Forgetting even to breathe, Yuder twisted his waist. The organ he held felt swollen, and soon, his seed spurted forth.

"Ah…!"

In a tremendous explosion of sensation, sound seemed to fade away.

"Ha… ha…"

"…Are you okay?"

After a moment, Kishiar’s voice sounded distant. Yuder, slowly regaining his vision, blinked lazily. He had slipped during his climax and was now lying atop Kishiar. Looking down at the hand that had held on until the end, he saw it covered in a mix of water and seed.

Though he had just released, Yuder’s organ was still half-erect. But more noticeable was Kishiar’s, still unreleased, swollen even more than before, filling his hand to the brim.

Previously, it had boasted an impressive size, but this was the first time it had grown to such an extent.

Dont look there, look at me instead.

Yuder, unable to avert his gaze from the lower abdomen, felt a hand reach out, grasping his cheek and guiding his eyes upward. In stark contrast to the alarmingly swollen lower part, the pale face, flushed and damp, was erotically captivating to the point of losing one’s senses.

…What did you say?

I asked if you’re alright.

Yes… I’m fine.

Traces of the intense emotions that had surged to the brink, overwhelming the depths of his soul, still lingered. The remnants of those emotions within him made his head feel foggy and clouded, struggling to continue his thoughts.

Perhaps this sensation was akin to the feeling of being drunk. It seemed a possibility.

Lost in these thoughts, Yuder heard Kishiar whisper in a soft voice.

Shall we wash up and leave?

…Do you mean to stop?

He thought that if Kishiar suggested stopping just because he looked a bit tired, given his current aroused state, he wouldn’t stay quiet.

Please, speak frankly.

Seeing the resolute spark in Yuder’s eyes, Kishiar stared at him for a moment before bursting into laughter. Even his laughter seemed more sexually charged than usual, perhaps due to his dampness.

If I’m to speak frankly… of course, I don’t want to stop. But if we do it here, well get cold.

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